

El Agua Viva:

Water, Society, and Collective Action in the FestiBarrio

Alexa Allamand González, Mariano Hernández Osuna, Alan Magdiel Huerta Rojas, Alejandra Sánchez Navarro,
Kacper Przyborowski



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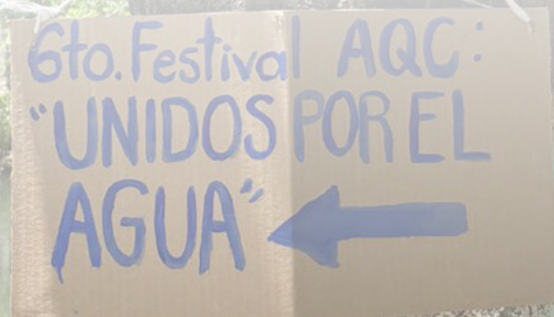
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Note: Authors are listed alphabetically with the faculty mentor listed last.

Cover photo: Sign directing people to where the *FestiBarrio* was held in Conca





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FIGURE 1. Sign for the *FestiBarrio* in Conká

Executive Summary

We explore the dynamic relationship between water, society, and collective action in Querétaro, Mexico. In the context of shifting governance, marked notably by the 2022 Water Law, this study examines how grassroots efforts seek to reconfigure water not merely as a resource, but as means of social and political participation. By analyzing *FestiBarrio*, a collective initiative that mobilizes in response to community needs, this case explores how water functions as a social catalyst for community cohesion, political engagement, and grassroots forms of political participation. Drawing on interviews and participant observation in the communities of Tolimán and Conká, as well as engagement with collective spaces across Querétaro, we explore the lived experiences of communities navigating uncertainty and scarcity concerning water,

while developing alternative mechanisms of political participation.

Context: Querétaro's Water Crisis

The state of Querétaro, in the heart of Mexico's central plateau, faces a myriad of water-related challenges, including water scarcity which, to an extent, can be attributed to urban and industrial expansion. Its semi-arid climate hinders precipitation and limits water availability, but climate alone does not explain the depth of the crisis.¹ The problem of water scarcity is mainly structural, shaped by historical discrepancies between institutional planning, urban expansion, and natural water availability. This has created a systemic crisis that touches every corner of

¹ "Escasez Provocada en la Zona Metropolitana de Querétaro" [Shortage Caused in the Metropolitan Area of Querétaro], Bajo Tierra Museo de Agua, 2023, 1. [Link](#)

society: rural farms, dense urban neighbourhoods, domestic households, and industrial zones alike.²

Nowhere is this water crisis clearer than in Santiago de Querétaro — the state's largest city. Between 1970 and 2017, the municipality's urban footprint increased by 1,762 per cent, while the population grew by 443 per cent, highlighting a disproportionate and unsustainable expansion.³ This growth, driven by real estate development and industrial investment, has far outpaced infrastructure planning, resulting in pressure on water resources. In response, large-scale infrastructure projects such as a new trans-state aqueduct system have been promoted, alongside increasing interest in water recycling through treatment plants for domestic use as solutions to the problem. However, instead of addressing the root causes of overuse and mismanagement, these megaprojects often frame water access as a political spectacle, serving as shallow administrative statements rather than genuine structural solutions.

Within this context, institutions have struggled to keep up. In 2023, tracking water usage in Querétaro proved difficult because public water was frequently redirected for agricultural and industrial purposes, which together account for 71.1 per cent of total use. Insufficient regulation has enabled both legal and illegal overexploitation of already-strained water resources, resulting in deficits in eight out of ten of the state's aquifers.⁴ In many ways these issues could have been expected given Querétaro's rapid urbanization

process, which has impacted over 60 per cent of its territory.⁵ All in all, the water available in Querétaro is unevenly distributed.

Compounding these pressures are the effects of climate change. Since 2019, prolonged droughts have become the new normal, peaking in 2020 when Querétaro was the only state in Mexico classified entirely under severe drought. This is particularly alarming because many of the last remaining water sources lie in rural, peripheral areas.⁶ As urban centres continue to expand, the temptation to extract from these communities grows, raising serious ethical and ecological concerns.

These tensions extend beyond droughts and shortages — they are encoded in the very laws that govern water. In 2012, a reform to Article 4 of the federal constitution formally recognized the right to water, in line with Mexico's international commitments, which recognize the human right to water and sanitation.⁷ However, despite this recognition, differences remain between the human right to water and Article 27 of Mexico's constitution, which treats water as a national good that can be used through government-granted permissions to private entities, known as concessions.⁸ Prior to this constitutional contradiction, the conception of water as a national good, subject to concessions, was reinforced by the *Ley de Aguas Nacionales* [National Water Law] of 1992, which had oversight on human rights considerations.⁹

2 Ibid., 10.

3 Victoria Ruiz, "Impacto del cambio de uso de suelo en el ciclo hidrológico en la Zona Metropolitana de Querétaro" [Impact of land use change on the hydrological cycle in the Metropolitan Area of Querétaro], *Consejo Queretano de Planeación Estratégica*, 15 April 2025; Q500: *Estrategia de Territorialización del Índice de Prosperidad Urbana en Querétaro* [Territorialization Strategy for the Urban Prosperity Index in Querétaro] (ONU-Hábitat, 2018), 143. [↗](#)

4 "Escasez Provocada," 6–7.

5 "Plan Municipal de Desarrollo 2021–2024," Gobierno Municipal de Querétaro, 2022, 114. [↗](#)

6 Francisco Solsona Igual, "Cambio Climático y Sequías en Querétaro" [Climate Change and Droughts in Querétaro] bachelor thesis, Facultad de Ciencias Naturales, Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro, October 2024, 17. [↗](#)

7 "The Human Right to Water and Sanitation," UN General Assembly, 2010. [↗](#)

8 "Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos (CPEUM)," first published 5 February 1917; latest reform 15 April 2025, México.

9 "Ley de Aguas Nacionales (LAN)," first published 1 December 1992; latest reform 8 May 2023, México. [↗](#)

Querétaro's local legal framework reflects this contradiction. In 2022, the *Ley que Regula la Prestación de los Servicios de Agua Potable, Alcantarillado y Saneamiento del Estado de Querétaro*, later referred to as the *Ley de Aguas* (Water Law), while acknowledging access as a right, entrenched privatization pathways and limited community governance. Even though general directors of the National Human Rights Commission in México established that the 2022 *Ley de Aguas* does not promote privatization but rather ensures water access, public distrust in the law has grown over the last years.¹⁰

This erosion of trust came to a tipping point in 2023, when civil society groups, energized after the *Festival Agua que Corre*, mounted a constitutional challenge to the Water Law. The Supreme Court nearly issued a ruling citing human rights violations,¹¹ but the local Congress preempted the verdict by amending the law, removing some provisions while leaving core privatization mechanisms intact.¹² At the centre of the controversy stood the Comisión Estatal de Aguas (CEA), or the state water commission, which provides and coordinates potable water and sanitation services. Civil society critics argue that its policies disproportionately benefit affluent neighbourhoods through exclusive concessions. Luis Alberto Vega Ricoy, executive member of CEA, reported that there are 22 active water concessions in the state, operating in predominantly wealthy areas of the city, such as El Campanario and Juriquilla.¹³

These dissonances, institutional weaknesses, and regulatory failures have significantly hindered progress toward the achievement of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The impact is especially visible in relation to Goal 6, which focuses on ensuring universal access to sustainable water and sanitation management. It also affects Goal 5, which promotes gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls because these barriers limit inclusive and community-led governance which calls for inclusive participation in decision making.¹⁴ So water is not neutral: it is a medium of power.

All these overlapping pressures, from drought, through urban overexpansion, regulatory weakness, and privatization, have revealed deep governance failures at the state level.¹⁵ The situation has sparked widespread concern among civil society as both rural communities and urban neighbourhoods face scarcity, frequent service interruptions, rising fees, forced displacements, flooding, and conflicts over water. In response to these institutional shortcomings, diverse forms of social organization have emerged, including grassroots collectives, academic networks, and environmental groups led by nonpartisan community leaders. Some notable examples include *Awita y Territorio*, led by Francisco Landa, *Bajo Tierra* Water Museum, *Micelio Urbano*, and H2Qro. Their involvement has been key in exposing the structural tensions underlying Querétaro's water crisis in recent years.

10 "Posicionamiento de la CNDH respecto a la Ley que regula la prestación de los servicios de agua potable, alcantarillado y saneamiento del Estado de Querétaro" [Position of the CNDH regarding the law regulating the provision of drinking water, sewage, and sanitation services in the State of Querétaro] [Official statement], Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH), 2022. [↗](#)

11 "Citizen Mobilization Has Pushed the Supreme Court to Review the Constitutionality of Querétaro's Water Law, Highlighting Serious Concerns Over Access to Water, Sanitation, and Participation Rights," [Status update], Bajo Tierra Museo de Agua, Facebook, 11 April 2024. [↗](#)

12 Minister Juan Luis González Alcántara Carrancá, "Proyecto de sentencia del Amparo en revisión 984/2023, promovido contra la Ley de Aguas del estado de Querétaro" [Draft ruling of the Amparo under review 984/2023, filed against the Water Law of the state of Querétaro], Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación, 2023. [↗](#)

13 Javier Zamonra, "Querétaro — Existen 22 concesiones de agua en Querétaro: CEA," AM de Querétaro, 26 May 2022. [↗](#)

14 "The 17 Goals," United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development, 2025. [↗](#)

15 Diana Mena, "Querétaro: fallas en agua pese a nuevos proyectos" [Querétaro: Water Failures Despite New Projects], *Tribuna De Querétaro*, 22 October 2024. [↗](#)

These experiences and tensions found practical expression in 2021 with the launch of the *Festival Agua que Corre*, a collaborative platform aiming to overturn a failing water governance model. Members of the *Agenda Agua y Clima de Querétaro*, a locally drafted manifesto, together with other local groups made up of different civil society sectors, such as activists and academics, organized the first festival. Over multiple editions, the festival has created space for dialogue, workshops, art, and community building.

These events were often held in open public spaces such as community centres, and because of their informal nature, were able to connect diverse voices across the state. The festival led to tangible outcomes, such as a civic guide for evaluating water laws, basin recovery proposals, and a citizen-led water watchdog. Yet its most important contribution may lie in its redefinition of the underlying issue where our consumption of water would no longer be seen as a problem to solve, but as a relationship to rebuild.

Despite its accomplishments, it was difficult to maintain strong participation levels from all groups, so after several editions, festival organizers recognized its limited impact. As one of the *Festival Agua que Corre*'s key figures, Francisco Landa, told us in an interview, "We need to think differently. If we [the festival's organizers] stay too vague, people might just say, 'Oh, how cool!' but it won't lead to real neighbourhood commitment. On the other hand, we were leaning too much into the academic side, which works for outreach, but only up to a point."

As organizers and individuals from civil society collectives recovered from the emotional and physical strain of organizing the festival's editions, a new idea grounded in the highly localized and communal essence of the festival emerged. Inspired by the Spanish word for neighbourhood, *barrio*, the festival transformed into a community-organized extension carried out within specific

physical spaces and by locals conscious of their lived realities and neighbourly responsibilities, a *FestiBarrio*. Landa explained, "It's about grounding [*Festival Agua que Corre*] in the community — its struggles, its knowledge, its land — in the rhythm of its everyday life."

The change allowed for a more local, grounded, accessible, and inclusive version of the festival. It put participatory democracy into practice and made sure that political decisions and debates were actually linked to what was happening on the ground, because, again in Landa's words, "Participatory democracy is the way to go. It's about organizing, staying informed, sharing ideas, having real discussions, knowing how to hold assemblies, and understanding your local territory. It has to be grounded in the community. Otherwise, it turns into empty talk and just defending the ideals you've built in your head."

The first edition of *FestiBarrio* took place in Tolimán in March 2023, where local leaders were invited to talk about the most urgent problems in their communities, followed by Concá in June 2025. Each festival was a result of communities' petition. Communities themselves initiated and organized *FestiBarrio*, ensuring that it addressed their own priorities and realities. This organizational approach enabled *FestiBarrio* to challenge dominant water-management models, which are often characterized by privatization and exclusion, by promoting civic participation and developing community-driven alternatives that respond to local needs frequently ignored by conventional systems.¹⁶

Hardly Reached

Concá is the community at the heart of this case study. Located in the northern part of the state of Querétaro, it is a hard-to-reach population not only because of its geographic isolation, but

16 "Acaparamiento de Lo Público y Mercantilización de Lo Común" [Hoarding of Public Property and Commodification of the Commons], Bajo Tierra Museo de Agua.

also because of how its concerns around water access and rights have been minimized or ignored by government institutions. The community's experiences help us understand how exclusion works on multiple levels, and why it's helpful to look at what hard to reach means within the specific context of Mexico.

In Mexico, what it means to be hard to reach is contested. The term is often used to describe isolated communities, but our work in Concá suggests a more complex reality. Many communities are not unreachable in any practical sense — they are regularly present, organized, and vocal. What makes them hard to reach is not their silence, but the state's refusal to listen. In this context, the term describes something structural: a condition produced by long histories of exclusion, disinvestment, and misrepresentation. Even within cities, academics, activists, and collectives who question how water is governed often face similar patterns of marginalization.

Rather than a matter of access, the challenge in Querétaro lies in how the state chooses to recognize or ignore certain actors, often based on whose perspectives threaten entrenched interests. In many ways, these interests treat communities' concerns as minimal and filter them out of dominant narratives and even political processes. This includes the environmental defenders and water justice activists associated with the *Festival Agua que Corre*, a loose but deeply engaged network made up of students, researchers, teachers, artists, and local organizers from across urban and rural Querétaro.

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Given this loose nature of organization, when asked to define their collective space, members of the festival often hesitate. Their organizing doesn't fit easily within conventional labels. It is intentionally fluid, crossing institutional boundaries and mixing academic work with street protest, artistic performance with legal advocacy. And despite their sustained involvement in water-related issues across the state, from research to rallies, they remain largely outside official decision-making spaces. As a result, so too do the communities they advocate for.

This is the case of Concá, a community located in the northern region of the state of Querétaro,

near the renowned Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve and approximately four hours from the state capital. With a population of approximately 1,193 inhabitants, Concá is composed of five barrios (neighbourhoods): El Temporalito, Misión, Los Puentes, Centro II,

and El Sabino. The town sits near the headwaters of the Concá River, part of the broader Pánuco River Basin, and was historically surrounded by fresh springs and seasonal streams. Although the municipality is named Arroyo Seco (dry stream), locals remember a time when water ran year round. As a local elder told us, "water would be waist-high, and you couldn't see the riverbed, as the current of the water would also be quite strong. Nature around used to be greener. There were fish swimming in big schools, and it felt almost like the river itself was the life source of the whole community." Today, however, excessive extraction, growing tourism, contamination, and reduced rainfall in the context of climate change have led to a visible decline in groundwater, significantly reducing the flow of many springs.

Agriculture remains the backbone of Conká's economy, alongside fishing and fish farming. But in recent years, tourism has become a double-edged sword.¹⁷ While it brings new income through hospitality and eco-tours, often built around the area's scenic rivers and UNESCO-listed Franciscan mission, it also exacerbates existing inequalities around water access. Locals report decreased flows and increased contamination, but their concerns are rarely reflected in the glowing brochures and tour websites that now define the municipality's online presence.

A simple search for "Conká, Querétaro" in any search engine yields dozens of results promoting tourism: guided tours, lodging options, and descriptions of the ecological richness within the municipality of Arroyo Seco. Far harder to find is any mention regarding the community's growing water-related challenges, including increasing contamination and the appropriation of water sources by industrial actors. Local residents have raised these concerns repeatedly, both in public forums and directly to municipal authorities, with limited response or resolution.

In Conká, we see that being hard to reach can be the result of state neglect and extractive development. Municipal authorities' silence minimizes these struggles, allowing injustices to persist under the guise of progress. Rethinking this community assessment means recognizing water as political and listening as a form of recognition. Such rethinking took shape through the *FestiBarrio* in June 2025, an intervention grounded in visibility, collaboration, and the refusal to remain unheard.

FestiBarrio: Rooted in Its Context

Changing the broad approach of the *Festival Agua que Corre* to the much more localized *FestiBarrio*

came out of a great collective necessity to step back and rethink how collective organization had taken a toll on those who had participated within the *Festival Agua que Corre*. The cracks in the 2022 model were becoming visible, especially when activities were stretched across many places within the state. From this fragmentation and fatigue, the *FestiBarrio* emerged as a natural evolution of the *Festival Agua que Corre*, rooted in a defined local geographical space.

Organizers of the festival, such as Dr. Francisco Landa, noted that the activities implemented across different zones of the Metropolitan Area of Querétaro faced recurring logistical and participation challenges. And as Eckhart Campero explained to us, mental and emotional fatigue overtook the organizers and participants of *Festival Agua que Corre*. "Keeping up the intensity of the festival following 2022 was hard on all of us ... after losing the legal battle to stall the adoption of the Water Law, and seeing our brothers detained in peaceful protests, you could feel our willingness to continue slowly draining away."

This fatigue, palpable throughout those collectives that had donated their time, effort, and know-how to creating the *Festival Agua que Corre*, meant that participants found themselves depleted and faltering. Through a deep process of coming together, they engaged in discussion, reflection, and recognition from which emerged a collective healing. As Clara Tinoco put it, "As a result of our setbacks and the collective ache of seeing Querétaro adopt [the 2022 Water Law], the initiative to step back and reflect as a festival was born. For us, what was important was to heal emotionally and physically — finding joy in resistance, not tragedy."

The *FestiBarrio* was then born as a scaled-down but rooted format that would allow the festival to settle deeply into specific neighbourhoods and communities. The principal catalyst for this reconfiguration was the *Parlamento Abierto*

17 "Plan Municipal de Desarrollo 2015–2018: Municipio de Arroyo Seco (2015)," Gobierno municipal de Arroyo Seco, 22–23. [↗](#)

Ciudadano [Citizen Open Parliament] of 2023. During meetings with community leaders, water issues kept surfacing, not as an abstract concern, but as a lived crisis. Among the cases presented, three municipalities raised concerns related to water access and management. In particular, the municipality of Tolimán drew attention.

Although not alone in its water-related concerns, Tolimán represented one of the most prominent cases of water-use issues, given its significance within the community, and a wider web of water mismanagement between municipalities and communities. The absence of a wastewater treatment plant in the town of Bernal, for example, was a major cause of pollution in several tributaries of the Tolimán River. It affected water bodies from the community of San Antonio de la Cal, passing through the neighbourhood known as *El Cardonal*, and extending to the delegation of San Pablo, where vital aquifers supply an important portion of the municipality's drinking water. However, this issue went beyond water treatment, eating away at the very essence of community memory and identity. A resident of the area said:

The whole river is stagnant, full of muck and debris. And all of that, when water comes and the river swells, causes the fields near the riverbank to dry out and stink. Nowadays, there aren't any fruit trees in the fields like there used to be. The children, or us, can no longer go to the river to bathe, wash, or even step in the water. We get sick.¹⁸

In people's anecdotes and reflections, we heard how the river's degradation rippled outward: impacting human health, local fauna and flora, and even the economic rhythm of the area. These

weren't vague calls for state support. They were concrete, urgent appeals for infrastructure, dignity, and environmental justice.

Festival organizers made sure to include local residents alongside experts on naming and addressing the issues. When *FestiBarrio* was launched there, it wasn't imposed from the outside. It aimed to co-produce a diagnosis through community dialogue, valuing generational wisdom, historical memory, and both successful and failed past efforts. Their ultimate objective was to develop a medium- and long-term integral water-management plan that could serve as a model for sustainable water governance and pollution prevention.

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FestiBarrio effectively anchored the broader goals of the *Festival Agua que Corre* as it responded directly to the specific needs of a community that not only voiced its

concerns but also helped define the terms of the event. The community's call to address water pollution in their territory gave concrete shape to the festival's broader mission, allowing it to be grounded in a particular geography, with particular challenges, actors, and resources. Water became the organizing principle through which academic, social, and local actors converged to co-produce knowledge and action.

This process was not accidental; it also revealed how localized interventions gain strength when they are embedded in the lived realities of the communities involved. For instance, the *FestiBarrio* in Tolimán was built upon existing networks of trust and community leadership, while also incorporating new voices from academic and technical experts, and civil society organizations. This collaboration was fundamental in sustaining the initiative beyond a one-time event. By

18 Citizen of Tolimán in "Pre-diagnóstico comunitario" [Community pre-diagnostic], Bajo Tierra Museo de Agua, 2023, 1. [↗](#)

grounding the *Festival Agua que Corre* in the real-life concerns of a specific place, organizers helped turn water into both an organizing principle and a shared cause.

We saw this again during the 2025 edition, when the *FestiBarrio* was reimagined in the town of Concá. Although Concá's environmental conditions differed from those in Tolimán, the underlying concerns remained: who controls water, and how is it distributed? In Concá's *FestiBarrio*, the central issue was the deteriorating condition of the acequia (irrigation canal), primarily affected by wastewater discharges from within the community and unequal water distribution by companies and others. However, during the development of the *FestiBarrio*, additional sources of water contamination became evident, particularly agricultural runoff caused by chemical fertilizers and pesticides in nearby fields, which drain into the river during irrigation. Accumulated waste along the river's edges also contributed to the waterway's degradation. As one of the organizers told us, "You can clearly see that the water becomes less clean as you walk downstream, toward the area where the new hotels are and where all the fertilizers and pesticides from the crop fields end up in the river basin. It's a shame, really."

The Ecology Coordination of Concá, led by Tania Guadalupe Reyes, along with the municipal government of Arroyo Seco, reached out to the festival organizers to carry out a new edition of the *FestiBarrio* called *FestiBarrio Agua que Corre: Unidos por el Agua* [*FestiBarrio Running Water: United by Water*]. It brought together the neighbourhoods of El Temporalito, Misión, Los Puentes, and El Sabino — communities connected not only by their shared commitment, but also by the water that springs from El Sabino, the common source of water in their waterways.

As we accompanied organizers in the preparation stages, we witnessed not just logistical coordination, but the shaping of a common vision. Activists like Clara Tinoco (*Centro*

Transdisciplinario de Incidencia Socioambiental), Eckhart Campero (*Colectivo Bajo Tierra Museo de Agua*), and María Guadalupe Hernández (*Colectivo Cascadas*) joined forces to design an event that reflected Concá's context.

The result was a festival that wove together environmental education, artistic expression, and hands-on solutions: from home-made biofilter workshops (offering self-maintaining water-treatment alternatives) and waste separation training to eco-sculpture contests and film screenings. All these activities were structured to raise awareness about water and environmental care, while strengthening the ties between local knowledge, science, and art. They reinforced networks capable of sustaining long-term environmental engagement rooted in the specific dynamics and needs of the territory, emphasizing that, in the words of one participant, "With all the alternatives that we can choose to change the way we've been treating the water and land that belong to the community, it's just a matter of informing others about them and starting to take action to achieve that change that we're looking for."

Today's *Festival Agua que Corre* is not the same one that was created in the context of the 2022 Water Law in the Metropolitan Zone of Querétaro. Its current shape is the result of a process — messy, collaborative, and sometimes improvised — ultimately grounded in the realities of the people it serves. *FestiBarrio* stands as an example of how environmental action gains traction when it listens to and grows from the ground up. In Tolimán and Concá alike, water has acted as both a lens and a catalyst through which communities articulate their identities, their demands, and their hopes, reflecting the idea that, as another participant eloquently said, "Sometimes, one may not notice the real power that water holds. Whenever something is happening with the water that brings life to our communities, we all realize how important it is to take care of it, because water itself has been taking care of us all along."

By following how *FestiBarrio* has been adapted in different places, we can better understand the conditions under which localized environmental action emerges, how networks of shared action are built, and how the defence of water becomes an entry point for broader social transformation. In other words, this case challenges us to rethink water's role not only as a natural resource, but as a structuring force in the production of territory, citizenship, and collective life.

Gender

As with many other forms of grassroots activity, the *FestiBarrio* has implications for gender relations. In past editions of the *Festival Agua Que Corre*, feminist collectives promoted gender-specific approaches. For example, the third edition of the festival included a workshop called *Mujeres en la defensa del Agua* [Women in the Defence of Water], along with a brief manifesto describing the relationship between participating women and water that said: "Water is present in our pregnancies, in caring for life, in protecting it; we women stand firm in the defence of water because for us the limits are very clear; this is not a commodity."¹⁹

Their manifesto alludes to how water has traditionally been associated with the feminine, particularly as a symbol of fertility; just as water sustains and generates life, so too have women been symbolically positioned as life-givers. Descriptions of water often rely on language such as "variable," "healing," "life-giving," "adaptable," or "transformative" — attributes commonly linked to femininity.

Women's historical roles as caregivers and household providers have positioned them at the forefront of water-related responsibilities. Traditionally tasked with securing water for domestic use, including cooking, cleaning, and caregiving,



FIGURE 2. Sculpture from the Eco Sculptures competition by young people as part of *FestiBarrio*



FIGURE 3. Community participating in the biofilter workshop at *FestiBarrio*

¹⁹ "También somos agua" [We are also water], Las Tertulias Feministas, Bajo Tierra Museo De Agua, 2022. [link](#)

women have developed a profound awareness of the quality and accessibility of freshwater sources. As a result, they are often more attuned than men to the need for water protection and preservation, recognizing its essential role in sustaining life and well-being.²⁰

Their lived proximity to water has contributed to the fact that many environmental activists, both globally and in local contexts, are women. Various explanations have been proposed for this phenomenon. For example, Ursula Le Guin has argued that women have historically been cast as silent figures, expected to “listen,” much like nature itself. Today, however, women are speaking up, and not solely for themselves. They are giving voice to those who have been silenced or rendered invisible: animals, trees, rivers, and rocks.²¹

However, the majority of people involved in water governance continue to be men. Despite the increasing presence of women in water-related debates, the spaces of discussion and decision making remain dominated by male power.²² According to the World Bank, fewer than one in every five workers in water sector institutions worldwide are women, and they hold fewer than 20 per cent of management positions.²³ Thus, even though women and water appear

intrinsically linked, women often face significant challenges in securing meaningful participation in water governance processes.²⁴ Gender not only correlates with inequalities in power, freedom, and social status but also shapes the capacity to access and exercise authority over rights, resources, and goods. As one local feminist group argues, “[Water] must be politicized, give structural weight to structural powers.”²⁵

In response to such structural imbalances, Mexico undertook a legal effort in 2019 to address the

historical deficit in women’s civil and political participation through the constitutional reform known as *Paridad en Todo* (Parity in Everything). This reform seeks to ensure substantive equality between men and women across the

executive, legislative, and judicial branches, as well as within constitutionally autonomous bodies at all levels of governance.²⁶ In practice, it mandates that these institutions must include equal numbers of men and women.

Despite such official reforms, gender parity remains elusive. A review of the organizational structure of institutions such as the *Comisión Estatal de Aguas* (CEA) [State Water Commission] in Querétaro, an autonomous entity responsible for planning, constructing, and managing water

Sometimes, one may not notice the real power that water holds. Whenever something is happening with the water that brings life to our communities, we all realize how important it is to take care of it, because water itself has been taking care of us all along.

20 Tatiana Vieira de Moraes, “Water, Gender and (Un)equality/Agua, género e (des)igualdade,” *Direito e Práxis* 16, no. 2 (2025). [↗](#)

21 Karen Warren and Nilüfer Erkal, *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 128.

22 Vieira de Moraes, “Water, Gender and (Un)equality.”

23 World Bank, quoted in C.E. Romero Herrera, “De la estadística a la realidad: Las mujeres en el cuidado, gestión y defensa del agua” [From statistics to reality: Women in the care, management and defence of water] *Impluvium* 19 (2022): 29. [↗](#)

24 Facanha in Vieira de Moraes, *Direito e Práxis*.

25 “También somos agua.”

26 “Guía práctica para la implementación del principio de paridad en las instituciones de la Administración Pública Federal” [Practical guide for the implementation of the parity principle in the institutions of the Federal Public Administration], Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres (INMUJERES), 2024, 13. [↗](#)

systems in the state, reveals that the board of directors is made up of 14 members, only two of whom are women, with just one serving as a full member of the board. Similarly, within the 16-member Water Advisory Council of the CEA, only three are women, including the council president.²⁷ These statistics underscore the persistent gap between formal parity mandates and actual representation in water governance bodies, a disparity that Clara Tinoco identified when she told us “water is a patriarchal issue because it is used as a means of conquest. Men make law, and women are the defenders.”

By contrast, the *FestiBarrio* creates a space in which women assume leadership roles and gain visibility within the water movement. While institutional water management in Querétaro continues to reflect patriarchal dynamics, the *FestiBarrio* stands as a counterpoint: a grassroots initiative where women are not merely present but instead central actors in shaping water governance and advocacy. In fact, when asked about the role of gender within the *FestiBarrio*, participants commonly report that they have not explicitly developed a gender approach in their initiatives because they perceive it to be unnecessary.

While the *FestiBarrio* may not brand itself as feminist or frame its mission in gendered terms, the reality on the ground is clear: women lead. As one of the organizers observed, “Leadership in the festival is feminine. It seems almost accidental because it wasn’t planned. Women simply were the ones who stepped up.” In the festival, women organize, teach, remember, and act. For instance, during the Conca *FestiBarrio*, roughly 70 per cent of attendees were women, ranging from children to elders, reflecting a profound and multigenerational engagement not only with water but also with its governance. While the initiative does not formally identify as such, it operates in practice as an eco-feminist movement, without making it a central aspect of its organization. As organizers explain, the prevalence of women and

their leadership has never been planned, but rises out of an organic and well-known tie between water and women. As Francisco Landaput it, “If you were to ask me about theory, or a feminist perspective that guides the *FestiBarrio*, I’d tell you that we haven’t given much thought to it. The whole process has to be organic, for the communities and collective organizations alike.”

Lessons Learned

Conca’s *FestiBarrio* unfolded as something difficult to unequivocally define, and perhaps this is precisely the point. The *FestiBarrio* uses its nature as a fluid and ever-changing space to continue the work started by the *Festival Agua que Corre*. It is ultimately dependent on the people who bring it to life, grounded in their own particular experiences and spaces. These qualities, shaped by water’s role within community life and the formation of its collective memory, give the *FestiBarrio* its strength. Its structure remains open and dynamic, its outcomes determined not by outside evaluation, but by local meaning and purpose.

Although the *FestiBarrio* emerged as an adaptive space, shaped by the collective efforts of both organizers and attendees of the *Festival Agua que Corre*, our observations of the planning process revealed a certain informality to its structure and definition. To some, it may be a space of companionship; others point to it being a simple event meant to raise awareness; and still others classify it as a proper political actor within its own right. Our experiences with the people behind the *FestiBarrio* left us wondering if this difficulty in defining it is truly its essence to begin with.

Water, and the actions taken to defend it, becomes not just a theme taken on by the *FestiBarrio*, but lends its own fluid and vital essence to its organization. As main organizer Eckhart Campero describes it, “The festival is dynamic; it’s organic. It

27 “Organigrama Institucional,” Comisión Estatal de Aguas Querétaro (CEA), 2025 [web access denied outside of Mexico]. [↗](#)

is a space where we can address specific realities, but it is also a social actor. The festival in itself is flowing water.”

What we once knew as *Festival Agua que Corre* continues to exist in parallel with the new, highly local, *FestiBarrio*. Together, these spaces reveal, through shared experience, that the struggle over water in Querétaro is far more than a crisis of supply; it is a crisis of meaning, governance, and power. Water, often perceived as an invisible commodity, is in fact deeply embedded in the social fabric. It's a carrier of memory, a marker of inequality, and a catalyst for political action. As stakeholders collide over its control and use, water emerges not as a passive resource but as an active force that shapes identities, relationships, and territorial claims.

This reframes water not as something that simply flows through pipes or rivers, but as something that flows through society itself, through institutions, protests, and shared imaginaries. It challenges us to see how communities

organize, resist, and imagine futures through their relationship with water. In Querétaro, where tensions over drought, privatization, and exclusion run deep, water has become more than a utility — it has become a mirror of democracy, a terrain of struggle, and a demand for justice. And in the most remote and overlooked corners of the state, *FestiBarrio* reminds us that reclaiming water is also about reclaiming voice, space, and presence.

What makes this process so striking is how it allows for different, often conflicting, ways to understand water's significance, even within a single household. Through our observations and informal conversations in Concá, it quickly became apparent that water escapes the language of absolutes. Those living within the community, even ourselves as outsiders, often point to water's spiritual and cultural value as inherently tied to

the land and its health, while using and thinking of it through the language of consumption and services. This contradiction was captured by one resident who explained: “For those who have never had to walk the trails of the sierra (mountains), the value of water is lost. They don't understand the symbolic value that is offering a glass of water to someone who has walked for days — it is revitalizing for the soul.”

These contradictions, between water's role as a service to be “used” and “consumed” and as an environmental actor in its own right, do not cancel each other out, but coexist within the same places, constantly shaping our understanding of its meaning. These perspectives simply reflect just how complex water, and our actions around its governance, are.

Recognizing these layered perspectives allows us to see Querétaro's water governance as something that people experience on the ground. Policies become part of daily life, but above all, shape and intersect with the

various personal and communal understandings of water. Understanding this complexity, where overlapping identities and their expressions meet, helps us move beyond the usual thinking that separates “consumers” of water from “defenders” of it, or “urban” from “rural.” *FestiBarrio* acts as both the place and space where identities come together, acting as a catalyst for these and reflecting them as tangible actions. In Concá, the acts of community-led river clean-ups, community mapping, and artistic events such as plays centred on tales of personified rivers in the community could not be possible without this recognition of the many ways in which water is central to communities.

One of the most significant takeaways from our research is the role water plays in shaping collective life. It is often treated as a resource to

The struggle over water in Querétaro is far more than a crisis of supply; it is a crisis of meaning, governance, and power.

be managed, but its meaning extends far beyond supply and demand. In places like Concá, water is tied to questions of autonomy, territory, and survival. It helps define the relationships people have with their land and with one another. This deeper, lived understanding of water was brought to life through the *FestiBarrio*, which provided moments of reflection and political expression through everyday actions. Children painted murals and performed plays about local rivers. Elders shared stories of past water struggles. Organizers discussed the risks posed by extraction and development. This intergenerational exchange invited reflection and connection. As one organizer put it, “This [intergenerational dialogue] is a space for [children] to listen to the stories of your elders, to know their experiences, to know what the community used to be like, and to know how you experience it. How do you see the river today?”

Ultimately, water becomes part of how communities build their political voice, and gives strength and meaning to action charged with political meaning, whether that be a space where communities come together, or simply in the ways in which collective memory is kept alive and transmitted from one person to another. In recent years, water’s growing presence in public debates, legal disputes, and grassroots movements across the state of Querétaro have highlighted the tension present around our understanding and conception of water’s role in our society. However, although deeply rooted in local forms of organization, *FestiBarrio* acts as one of many responses to a reality so often felt and lived by the Global South. Water’s very existence as a contested, “problematic” resource, is not unique to Mexico, and neither are the ways in which communities should seek to organize.

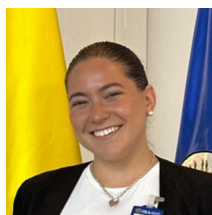
Querétaro’s case, and more specifically that of Concá and its *FestiBarrio*, highlight the ability water possesses to bring all of us together — sometimes in protest, sometimes in celebration, often in both. Whether it be in Concá or elsewhere in the world, water is not separate from our political life; it is our political life. It conditions how

people come together, how they respond and adapt to their realities, and how they construct and envision futures where water governance is rooted in tolerance, understanding, and co-building. In this way, *FestiBarrio* reveals something beyond simple responses to public policies. It invites us to reconsider how we understand water, to imagine and remember its role as an articulator for our own realities, values, identities, and visions of justice. In doing so, we are reminded that solutions to environmental and political challenges must begin where water is lived, not just where it is managed.



FIGURE 4. Concá’s community on its way to community mapping at *FestiBarrio*

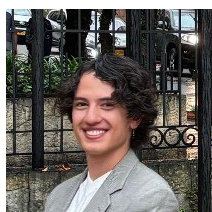
Research Team



Alexa Allamand González is an international relations student at Tecnológico de Monterrey, Querétaro campus. She leads *Manos en Acción*, a student group that promotes human rights through events and partnerships with organizations such as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Desaparecidos Justicia A.C. She is helping create the first Amnesty International activism group in Querétaro and coordinates awareness activities for *Infini*, a group focused on neurodivergent inclusion. She has also worked with Sager der Samler on democratic hosting as a tool for social transformation and recently pursued an academic concentration in peace, conflict, and security.



Mariano Hernández Osuna is an international relations student. Over the past several years, he has engaged in civic and political life through grassroots organizing, student leadership, and international research. He served as chapter president of the World Youth Alliance in Querétaro and later as president of his university's Student Society of International Relations, where he led diplomatic engagement initiatives. He contributed to peace dialogue evaluations with the OAS MAPP Mission in Colombia and interned with the Inter-Agency Research and Analysis Network (IARAN), supporting the 2030 Future Outlook report for Save the Children Italia. These experiences reflect his commitment to participatory processes, peace building, and long-term humanitarian strategy.



Alan Magdiel Huerta Rojas is an international relations student focused on community-building, diplomacy, and social impact. She served as vice president of SELRI, coordinating academic trips, symposiums, and partnerships with embassies and international organizations. She has collaborated with institutions such as Freedom House, WRI, UNHCR, and OpenStreetMap. She participated in the "Líderes en Movimiento" program (COLMEX) and currently serves on two national committees at Tec de Monterrey: one on gender-based violence prevention and another on gender diversity. She recently worked with the MAPP/OAS in Colombia, conducting research on citizen participation in the post-peace agreement context.



Alejandra Sánchez Navarro is a law and international relations student committed to social justice and the development of more inclusive communities. Her academic and volunteer work has focused on supporting vulnerable populations and promoting human rights. She has participated in legal clinics, providing free legal support; in *Manos en Acción*, a student group that promotes human rights through events and partnerships with organizations such as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Desaparecidos Justicia A.C.; and in the FETEC executive committee, representing students at Tecnológico de Monterrey.



Kacper Przyborowski is a lecturer in the School of Social Sciences and Government of Tecnológico de Monterrey in Querétaro. He holds a PhD in international relations from the University of Sussex. His recent work focuses on continuities between conflict and peace and alternative political imaginaries in Colombia. Kacper teaches peace and conflict studies, international relations theories, and critical research methodologies.



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