

Beyond the Crisis: Community-Led Water Governance as a Model for Environmental Sustainability

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Executive Summary

The water crisis in Querétaro is more than a resource challenge—it is a social and political inflection point that reveals how communities experience, interpret, and respond to environmental precarity. El Agua Viva shows that communities like the people of Concá are not passive recipients of policy but active creators of collective knowledge, stewards of local ecosystems, and protagonists of their own governance. The case demonstrates that sustainable solutions emerge at the intersection of technical understanding, cultural belonging, and political agency.

Community-led initiatives—particularly the FestiBarrio and the Festival Agua que Corre—show how participation can shift from symbolic consultation into genuine co-governance. This brief translates these insights into actionable, community-centered recommendations for decision-makers and peers.

Distilled Case Snapshots

- Core challenge: Navigating the limitations and possibilities of community participation in a water-stressed region where decisions remain largely centralized.
- Findings: Authentic solutions must originate within communities, blending cultural knowledge with technical inputs.
- Hard-to-reach population: Rural residents of Concá who face environmental vulnerability and limited influence in formal governance.
- Contribution: Demonstrates how community-led participation challenges paternalistic models and reshapes water governance.



Big-Picture Value: Why This Matters Globally

Hard-to-reach populations worldwide face similar paradoxes: those closest to environmental crises are often the least included in solutions. Community-led governance strengthens sustainability, justice, and cultural continuity. Local initiatives offer adaptable, principle-based models that other communities can learn from and reinterpret according to their own identities and ecologies.

Mapping of Policy Stakeholders

Primary Stakeholders

- Community members and leaders in Concá
- Festival Agua que Corre and grassroots cultural-environmental organizations
- Municipal and state water governance agencies in Querétaro
- Academic institutions researching water governance and community participation
- Regional environmental justice groups

Secondary Stakeholders

- Human rights commissions
- Environmental and sustainability NGOs
- International development organizations focused on water access
- Environmental activists and cross-regional justice networks

Solutions

Below are the most significant recommendations shaped by the evidence and community experience:

1. Recenter water governance around community leadership—not symbolic participation.
2. Institutionalize co-governance structures where communities share real decision-making power.
3. Recognize and support grassroots organizations as mediators and cultural stewards.
4. Adopt community-defined evidence frameworks that validate local knowledge.
5. Design funding approaches that protect community autonomy and avoid conditional influence.

Across interviews, observations, and participatory interactions, a shared truth emerged: communities are already producing solutions. The role of institutions must shift from directing to supporting. Recurrent themes include mistrust in top-down processes, cultural resilience, and the transformative capacity of collective action.

Remaining Gaps

- Lack of formal mechanisms ensuring meaningful community input in local governance.
- Uneven organizational capacity among local groups requiring long-term support.
- Tensions between state-driven metrics and community-defined data.
- Ongoing vulnerability to external political and financial pressures.

Recommendation Deep Dive

Institutionalize Community-Led Governance Structures

Participation is legally mandated in Mexico but remains symbolic in practice. This requires a cultural and procedural shift toward genuine co-governance. Local organizations like Festival Agua que Corre possess the trust and cultural legitimacy needed for authentic stewardship.

- **Financial Considerations:** Funding must enhance autonomy through small, flexible, local grants.
- **Social Dimensions:** Redistributes power, increasing trust but potentially facing resistance.

Validate Community Knowledge in Data and Evidence Systems

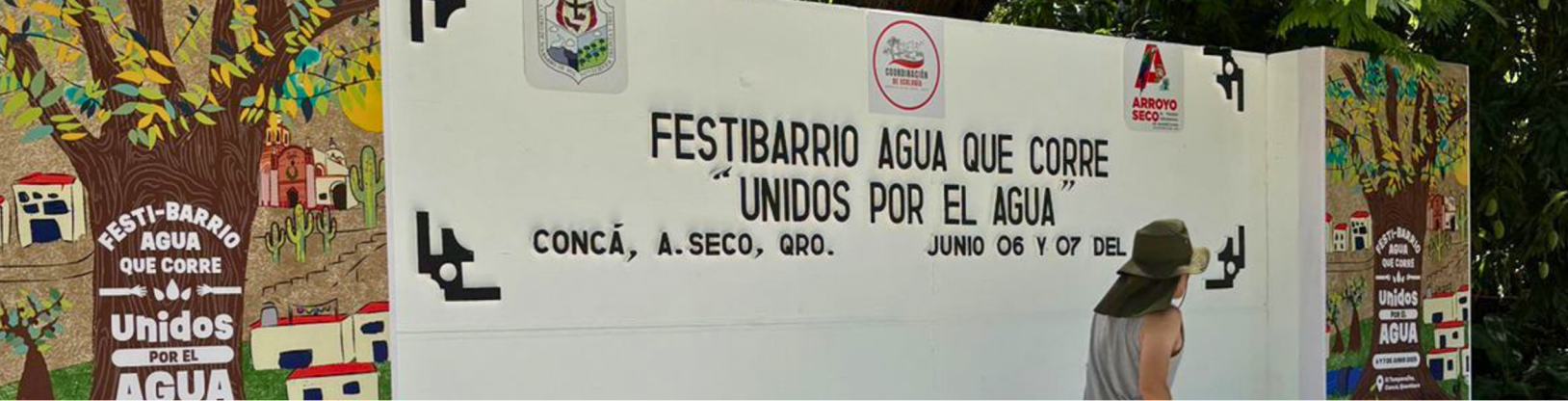
Conventional technical indicators often erase lived experience. Community-defined evidence—stories, observations, cultural markers—provides richer, context-specific knowledge to guide decision-making.

- **Feasibility:** Requires training in participatory monitoring and evaluation.
- **Cost:** Minimal—primarily facilitation and workshops.

Strengthen Local Organizations as Environmental Justice Actors

Local organizations understand cultural dynamics and political tensions. Formal collaboration agreements between communities and governmental agencies increase implementation success.





What Needs to Happen Next?

- Document the core principles that make the FestiBarrio effective while emphasizing flexibility.
- Develop a community-led, adaptable framework rather than a replication template.
- Expand only through community invitation, not external initiative.
- Pilot FestiBarrios in diverse regions to explore adaptation across contexts.
- Create a peer-to-peer network for shared learning among FestiBarrio communities.

What Should Be Prioritized?

- Cultural adaptation over replication to protect authenticity.
- Deep community listening to understand local histories and needs.
- Protection against political or institutional co-optation.
- Building and supporting local leadership capacity.
- Ensuring that communities fully own their version of the FestiBarrio.

Technical Assistance Needed

- Training in participatory governance methods.
- Legal support for community councils and co-governance agreements.
- Support developing community-defined evaluation frameworks.
- Ethical, autonomy-preserving funding mechanisms.
- Organizational strengthening for grassroots groups.

Conclusion

The FestiBarrio should be a seed—not a mold. Its strength lies in its ability to grow uniquely in each community that adopts it, guided by its cultural identity, collective imagination, and local relationship with water.



This work builds on the 2024-25 Reach research report, [“El Agua Viva: Water, Society, and Collective Action in the FestiBarrio,”](#) by Alexa Allamand González, Mariano Hernández Osuna, Alan Magdiel Huerta Rojas, Alejandra Sánchez Navarro, Kacper Przyborowski, and all the impactful partners, community members, and mentors involved in the research.

As part of the "Pathways from Evidence to Action" series, inspired by the African Center for Equitable Development (ACED), the Reach Alliance challenged researchers to identify connections, address gaps, and develop recommendations grounded in their findings. The series comprises thirteen briefing notes developing solutions for urgent climate, public health, and economic challenges and engages practitioners and policymakers in advancing pathways to implementation.

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