

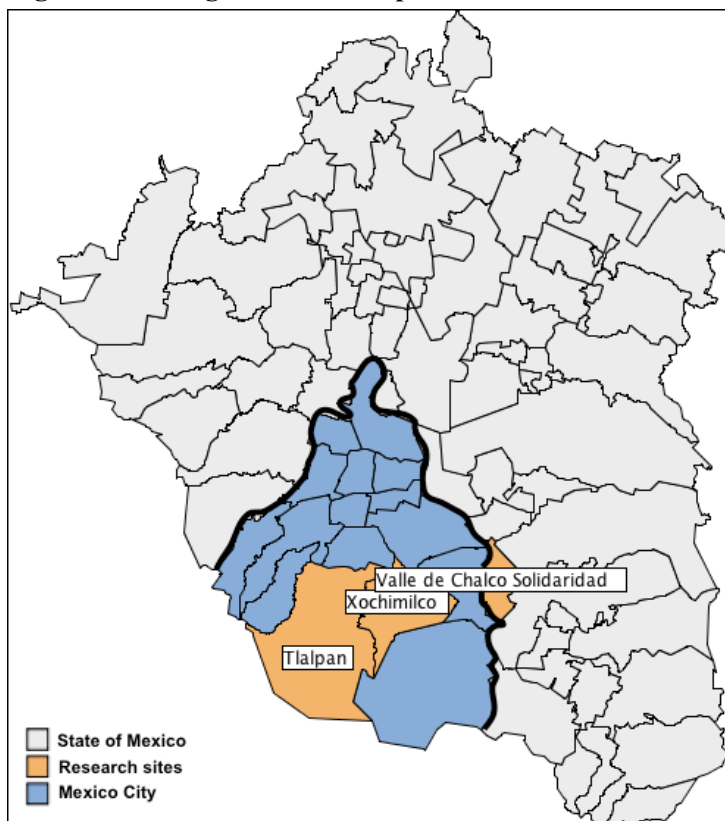
Repositioning the state's role through water politics in Mexico City's informal settlements

Guillem Ramírez Chico

Throughout the Mexico City metropolitan area, the struggle for water access often defines the relationship (or lack thereof) between municipal governments and residents. Guillem Ramírez Chico delineates the distinctive local politics of water provision in three of the area's informal settlements, asserting that poor households are frequently left vulnerable in the name of environmental conservation.

In Mexico City, water is used as a political tool to get political support, through client networks manufactured by local institutions and political parties (De Alba 2016; Vite Pérez 2001). In informal settlements, this phenomenon has gone a step further by not only determining who gets water and who does not, but also redefining the relationship between the state and its citizens. The state's presence is fading, and private political organizations are taking over its functions. This paper presents three case studies of informal settlements, based on field research conducted during the summer of 2017: Toltenco (in the borough of Xochimilco), Sifón (in the borough of Tlalpan), and Real de San Martín (in the municipality of Valle de Chalco Solidaridad).

Figure 1. Boroughs and municipalities in which the three study sites are located



Source: author's own work.

Informal settlements in Mexico City: a daily struggle for life

Informal settlements have developed over the last 50 years in Mexico City and its wider metropolitan area. Unaffordable housing costs in the urban core have forced poorer families on to cheaper land. Some of these populations moved to metropolitan municipalities in the State of Mexico, where housing and land regulations are more flexible than in Mexico City and it is thus easier to settle (Aguilar and Santos 2011; Connolly 2009; Connolly and Wigle 2017; Wigle 2014). Other families have moved on to land in environmentally protected areas in Mexico City, which combined make up 17.5% of the city's land (SEDEMA 2017). These areas are of special ecological interest and human intervention is banned. However, owing to the presence of families migrating from the city center and communities that were there before these areas were protected, 11% of land in environmentally protected areas was occupied by 858 informal human settlements in 2011 (SEDEMA 2013, p. 36).

The Toltenco and Sifón settlements are examples of informal neighborhoods located in environmental conservation areas in the southern part of the city, in Xochimilco and Tlalpan boroughs respectively. Real de San Martín is an informal settlement in Valle de Chalco Solidaridad, a metropolitan municipality immediately to the east of Mexico City, in the State of Mexico. Access to water in all three settlements is a daily struggle characterized by unreliable or non-existent public drinking-water supplies, which means resorting to expensive private alternatives, and subsequently facing insufficient volumes of drinking water.

In all three cases, the administration responsible for supplying drinking water refuses to provide piped water services. A Mexico City public official explains:

Sadly, irregular settlements are still a reality, and [their inhabitants] still struggle with access to services. However, we also know that if we start providing them with services, this is a means of formalizing them, of letting them stay there. [But m]any of these informal settlements are located in environmental conservation areas, so we are up against the wall: we must help those in need, but it means destroying the environment. So we are better off not [providing them with formal services].

However, there are key differences regarding institutional approaches to these settlements, which determine both inhabitants' living conditions and their relationship with state institutions.

The state in informal settlements: between absence and replacement

In Sifón, the borough of Tlalpan decided that, since the settlement was there before it became part of an environmental conservation area, the community had the right to be served via water trucks. However, public water trucks are often subject to delays—or do not come to Sifón at all during the dry season. When this happens, residents have to resort to much more expensive private water trucks. As a result, interviewees spent 15–20% of their monthly income on water during the rainy season, and 25–30% during the dry season. And yet the borough still requires residents to pay in advance for water-supply services; furthermore, it does not inform them about changes to water-truck fees. As one resident commented, “the [city] government sees water as a business. And I feel it should not be this way; I don't share this idea of water as a business.”

Figure 2. The informal settlement of Sifón, in the borough of Tlalpan



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In Toltenco, the state has not only withdrawn from its duties regarding residents, but has also become an opposing force to the very existence of the settlement. The community's inhabitants are denied access to basic services and citizenship rights—including water—on the grounds of the environmental value of the territory they occupy. Therefore, their access to water is precarious: they depend on water running through surrounding formal housing's pipes, which they illegally connect to through hoses, without their neighbors' consent. "Sometimes the pipe is a good one with sufficient water flow. Sometimes we are left very short of drinking water," states one resident. Reusing water is key to their survival. Whenever they can afford it, they buy bottled water for cooking and drinking—but this is a luxury in Toltenco, where incomes are extremely low. "There are times, believe it or not, when people don't have anything to eat," another resident remarks.

Yet they still consider the borough's non-intervention as its best possible scenario; the alternative is the borough evicting the community from the settlement. This means living in fear of the institution:

The day the borough administration comes here, we are screwed—excuse the language—because we are not a regular settlement. [...] We've often thought that we should indeed talk to the borough, but of course they are going to tell us: "you are occupying a plot of land plot you're not allowed to." But then, why do they let us own [these plots]? [They would tell us:] "Yes, you are landowners, but you are polluting a place you can't pollute." [...] If we bring the borough here, we are going to get hurt rather than get anything fixed. [...] The day they pay attention to us, we are out. And we are afraid of that.

The result of the borough's non-intervention policy is, therefore, precarious access to water, as well as "greater water pollution, greater scarcity, and an absolutely unsustainable mode of water management," according to one expert.

Figure 3. The informal settlement of Toltenco, in the borough of Xochimilco



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The situation is quite different in Real de San Martín: the state’s presence has been replaced by Antorcha Campesina¹—a social organization and political party linked to the federal government’s ruling party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI), focusing on the so-called “rural poor.” This organization’s full control of an informal settlement and its residents reveals the scope of the state’s abandonment of its functions: members of Antorcha Campesina occupy plots of land and the organization offers them to individuals and families living in formal but precarious conditions. The new settlement’s residents build their dwellings themselves, and the organization progressively upgrades their living conditions by providing them with services.

However, these services are not free. Access to water, for instance, is provided through private water trucks owned by the organization. As one expert puts it, this structure “generates an unarticulated market of illegal vendors who sell water at high prices, and a political group that gains ownership of the public agenda.” For example, one interviewee living in formal housing in the city

¹ Antorcha Campesina (literally “Torch of the Peasantry”) is also known as the Movimiento Antorchista Nacional (literally “National Torch Movement”).

spends around 7.5% of his monthly income on public water, whereas a resident of this informal settlement spends 11.5% on water trucks provided by the Antorcha Campesina network.

The benefits this organization derives from inhabitants are not only economic, but also political. The deal includes residents' full political loyalty to the organization, including attending marches and demonstrations, and voting for the party. In this context, residents' living conditions depend entirely on the community's political leadership. These words from a resident in Real de San Martín (Valle de Chalco Solidaridad) illustrate the extent to which life in the settlement relies on the goodwill of its political leadership:

As you will see, the community is *antorchista* [...]: we buy a plot of land to live on from the Movimiento Antorchista. [...] They then take us to marches—in theory, to demand services for us, but we are still benefiting them, because they are in politics: they bring people, and they are maybe given money for that. [...] And then we are provided with services, but slowly.

And then you vote for them?

Yes.

What would need to happen to see your living conditions improved?

[It's down to t]he leaders, basically. They need to work with us more.

Figure 4. Real de San Martín, in the municipality of Valle de Chalco Solidaridad



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Reassessing the state's role in informal settlements

Sifón, Toltenco and Real de San Martín illustrate the diverse circumstances of informal settlements in Mexico City and the (lack of) institutional presence they enjoy. The environmental cleavage—i.e. the political crossroads between prioritizing environmental or human needs—is a turning point in the relationship between the state and human settlements in Mexico City.

Indeed, as the result of land-related and environmental policies, informal settlements are increasingly becoming state-free spaces, which leads to uneven access to water. In Sifón, an unreliable water truck service is the only link between the community and the borough of Tlalpan. Yet, however weak the relationship between public administration and local residents may be, the community still enjoys some degree of institutional presence. This is not the case in the informal settlements in Toltenco and Real de San Martín, where the state is absent and residents are denied all public services. The non-intervention of the administration in the area covered by such settlements has been labeled the “withdrawal of the state.” In Toltenco, the local administration is an opposing force that threatens the very existence of the community. In Real de San Martín, a political organization—Antorcha Campesina—has assumed the state's functions of land control and service provision.

This environmental cleavage—and, in particular, access to water—has become a structuring factor in the relationship between state and residents. Moreover, it is giving rise to a worrying trend that local governments must address: the most vulnerable citizens are being left to their own devices for the sake of ecological preservation, and the state is being replaced by agents that are not answerable to the public but instead pander to private interests.

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