

## Personal Stories of Change

Elsa Meja\*: A perspective from a small-scale water service provider

*“Now I don’t only think about water locally, but also about the water sector globally”*



**Elsa Meja has been involved in The Water Dialogues in the Philippines since Penny Urquhart visited her at the family firm, Inpart Waterworks and Development Corp, during the Global Scoping Study. As a participant in the Berlin inaugural meeting, she was delighted to have the opportunity to be able to exchange ideas with other small-scale water providers as well as large-scale private operators. As a result of being in Berlin, a year later she was invited by the UNDP to attend a water conference in Morocco, which again allowed her to widen her perspectives on the sector.**

“Through The Water Dialogues I have learned so much about what is happening worldwide. Having started as a housewife who wanted to have some extra income to support my family, I never expected all this. We started constructing water tanks and moved on from there. Now I don’t only think about water locally, but also about the water sector globally.”

The original Meja family enterprise, Inpart Engineering, was a small construction company specialising in the production of water tanks for small towns and municipalities in and around Manila. In the 1990s, some of Inpart’s employees living in a neighbouring village were having difficulties accessing safe drinking water. Elsa and her family got involved, not only helping their employees to get water but also working with them to bring water to the whole community. It was this that led to the development of their water service business that later became Inpart Waterworks and Development Company.

Elsa attended the first meeting of The Water Dialogues in Manila. “Being part of a small firm, I wanted to know more about the issues related to water, not only in the Philippines but elsewhere. I wanted to learn what others did and share ideas with others.” At the time Elsa, with a small number of colleagues, was trying to persuade the government to formally recognise small-scale water providers (SSWPs). “Cooperatives and SSWPs were being ignored, no one was interested in what we were doing, where they were working, how many of them were working, let alone in what they needed. I wanted people in the sector to know about these organisations and their important role in filling the gap between the large concessionaires and the household.”

Research by the Philippines Dialogues reveals that almost 50% of the national population is served by small-scale private utilities, including local government systems operated by private utilities, most of which are unregulated and have no access to capacity building or information.

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For Elsa, the Round Table discussions organised by The Water Dialogues in the Philippines were especially important. “I attended all of them! They were all relevant but I remember best the ones on regulation and financing, because together with the Conference on SSWPs they really changed things.”

As a result of interactions with other Water Dialogues members, and participation in The Water Dialogues Round Tables at the national conference on the role of SSWPs in August 2007, the participants agreed that they should establish an organisation that could represent their issues. “After the discussions we had a conference where different small water providers were invited to find a common consensus to have an organisation to be a venue of sharing our experiences, good and bad – a venue to give us a voice in issues like policy reforms of water and regulation, financing etc.”

The first meeting of the SSWPs nascent association was held in October 2007 in Davao. Elsa was elected president and became head of the first legally registered organisation of SSWPs in the country – the National Water and Sanitation Association of the Philippines (NAWASA). She was then re-elected President at a meeting in Cebu on 9th October 2008. “I won’t be President forever but I’ll be there for the organisation 101%. By our third annual conference I would like to see a focus on creating a financing system for members and I’ll be working with STREAMS and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to see if they can support this. We also still need some technical assistance and capacity building. But in the meantime, I hope that NAWASA will become a bank of experiences – both successes and failures – so that all members can learn from each other.”

With NAWASA now growing and getting recognition from various government and non-government associations via The Water Dialogues, the door was opened for SSWPs to become a recognised part of the sector. “The meetings and Round Tables gave us access to information about the sector nationally and internationally and the opportunity to develop plans for both regulation and financing. They can help government realise that some changes can be made through changing styles and approaches rather than always having to create new legislation. For example, the Round Table on regulation of Small Scale Water Providers (SSWPs) has enabled grassroots groups to raise difficulties with NWRB’s draft bill in time for NWRB to respond to these before the bill is finalised.

“With the formalisation of [NAWASA] we have continuous participation in discussions regarding water issues and as a result of that, the regulator is trying to come up with lighter regulation [models] for small water providers – e.g. easier requirements, capacity building. There are financing windows that show interest in financing water projects for small water providers. Just before April, the Asian development Bank studied the methodologies / strategies for how small water providers can have access to financing. Other government financing institutions are now ready to engage in financing small water providers and during one of our seminars in preparation for the 3rd national conference in August 2009, one of the small business enterprises started introducing and promoting the process of financing

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schemes for small water providers. I attribute these important events to the National Dialogue.”

Elsa makes the following observations about the importance of the international component of The Water Dialogues and the scope it provides:

“The National Dialogue has now had the opportunity to bring the issues [raised in the Philippines] to the International Dialogue and... the issues of small water providers are [thus] being tackled and looked into. Our company from basically doing service delivery on our own, is slowly being recognised in the global water sector. I am so happy that I have been given a chance to be part of this International Assembly [June 2009]. What I want to emphasise is that what is happening now at a national level is the outcome of what was talked about in the Water Dialogue. It is related to the aims and objectives of The Water Dialogues.”