
Advocacy toolkit case studies

WATER STORAGE IN BRAZIL

THEME: Water, sanitation and hygiene

ADVOCACY APPROACHES: Community mobilisation
Government officials: meeting with
Mobilising people and campaigning
Working in alliances and coalitions

In north-east Brazil, Tearfund partner Diaconia worked with women's groups in rural communities near to the city of Caraúbas. They focused on educating women about their rights and empowering them to engage with the Municipal Forum on Public Policy. With the support of trade unions and rural community associations, these women sought to defend the interests of family farmers in their region.

Caraúbas and the surrounding area are semi-arid and rainfall is erratic. This means it is common practice to hoard food, water and animal fodder. This can be important during dry seasons, when communities rely on rainwater harvested during the rainy seasons in order to survive. However, it is not always reliable, and water sometimes runs out.

There is legislation in Brazil that commits the government to provide universal access to water. Unfortunately, the federal government has traditionally outworked this law by ordering the Ministry of National Integration to purchase polyethylene (PVC) tanks for water storage and ordering the National Health Foundation to distribute them in the semi-arid areas.

Diaconia was concerned about this practice because it undermined local knowledge of good practice in water storage. It also disempowered people and took away their dignity. As a result, they formed a coalition with other organisations to launch a campaign with a simple slogan: 'Say no to PVC tanks!' Many people were mobilised, including women's groups, family farmers and local churches. Public meetings were held, where they expressed their dissatisfaction about the PVC tanks and asked the federal government to allow them to build cisterns using their own local knowledge.

It was not easy and it took time. However, eventually the federal government agreed to change its practice. Diaconia learned that they needed to persevere and be patient. They learned that it was important to encourage participation from all affected groups. They also learned that it was wise to suggest constructive alternatives to the federal government, rather than just criticising the way it outworked the law.