

# Water Stories: A Focus on Mexico

Woodrow Wilson Center

October 11 – November 9, 2007

Real people stand behind every statistic. What do the faces of the global freshwater crisis look like? There are families like the Silvas, who live without access to an adequate supply of freshwater in a Mexico City barrio, and are a few of the 2 ½ billion people for whom safe water is scarce and proper sanitation is even rarer. Like children around the world, Carlos and Luis Silva play soccer outside their home in Colonia San Miguel in Mexico City's Iztapalapa district. Yet their family, living together in a tiny home built of scavenged bricks and tin, relies on a minimal flow of water (less than 200 gallons each week) for bathing, laundry, and flushing the toilet. For some in the region, such as those living in the apartment buildings of Batallones Rojos, water runs for one or two hours each day. While families in the city may not receive sufficient amounts of water, the water they do have is transported over mountains through the Cutzamala water system. Stretching for miles as it connects dams and spring water, this household water is drawn from the same water source that makes agriculture possible in the Valle de Bravo. These images provide a vivid glimpse of the lives behind the columns of numbing statistics on water and sanitation. They remind us of the real families around the world who can benefit so profoundly from solutions that are inexpensive, simple, effective, and readily available.

“Water Stories: A Focus on Mexico”, a collaboration between the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and Circle of Blue, offers a vivid glimpse of the lives that lie behind these statistics. Journalist J. Carl Ganter chronicles water and sanitation challenges facing families in the Iztapalapa region of Mexico City. Photographer Brent Stirton documents how water shapes everyday life in the Tehuacán Valley southeast of Mexico City, as residents struggle to obtain enough clean water to meet their basic needs. In Mexico, as with many other places around the world, the quest for water consumes time, energy, and valuable resources. Understanding this human struggle is one step toward ameliorating the global water crisis.



Like so many children in Colonia San Miguel, Luis Silva's family life revolves around the household water tanks, which define his well-being and his opportunities. Engineers in Mexico City's Iztapalapa region admit that there is simply not enough water in the pipes to go around for everyone. ©2006 J. Carl Ganter/Circle of Blue





The water in these rusting tanks must last for a week's worth of cooking, washing, and bathing in Iztapalapa, Mexico City. As in many parts on the world, a lack of water translates to a lack of sanitation. Here, clothing is washed sparingly and bathing takes place with a small bucket. ©2006 J. Carl Ganter/Circle of Blue



Water tankers abound throughout Mexico City, especially in Iztapalapa, where water demand exceeds the supply provided by the underground municipal infrastructure. ©2006 J. Carl Ganter/Circle of Blue





Rogelio Gonzalez manages this pumping and reservoir station that supplies water—for only two hours each day—to the 1,500 residents of the Batallones Rojos apartment complex. ©2006 J. Carl Ganter/Circle of Blue



The giant pumping towers of the Cutzamala system force water from Valle de Bravo's man-made Lake Avándaro up and over the mountains toward Mexico City. ©2006 J. Carl Ganter/Circle of Blue





Hand-tended irrigation trenches are fed by clear springs, which the Cutzamala water system eventually captures to sate Mexico City's thirst. Indigenous communities in the Valle de Bravo region are concerned about the large amounts of water being diverted to meet the demands of Mexico City, the world's second-largest metropolis. ©2006 J. Carl Ganter/Circle of Blue





It's a one-mile walk to the stream where this mother bathes her children twice a week. ©2006 Brent Stirton/Getty Images for Circle of Blue





Francisca Rosas Valencia dabs away tears while praying for her son, Florentine, who left home to work in Los Angeles. "It is not easy to be outside of one's homeland," she says. "That is what makes me sad. I fear that in the future my children and grandchildren and the families of my neighbors will be forced to leave." ©2006 Brent Stirton/Getty Images for Circle of Blue





In the damp, narrow tunnels of the *galerías filtrantes*, Pédro Hernández Martínez and Armando Castillo Osorio tend the work begun by their grandfathers, who dug these underground paths to water. ©2006 Brent Stirton/Getty Images for Circle of Blue



The Carrillo family constructed this water collection reservoir with the help of Alternativas, a regional nonprofit organization. Using a system of pipes and terraces, they are able to deliver precious water to their fields in the valley. ©2006 Brent Stirton/Getty Images for Circle of Blue





A young boy pauses on a makeshift garbage bridge as he crosses a stream of raw sewage near San Marcos. The townspeople fear that these unregulated discharges will eventually contaminate their wells, which are located several miles away. ©2006 Brent Stirton/Getty Images for Circle of Blue