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Water Activists across the African Continent: A View from the Field

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1. The Africa Water Network

As a senior policy advocate at Food & Water Watch, I am responsible for coordinating all of our work in Africa. Two years ago, we helped launch the Africa Water Network at the 2007 World Social Forum in Nairobi. While there are many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working in water and sanitation across the continent, the AWN is unique in that its work focuses on the question, “Who owns water?”

Water is increasingly being referred to as the “oil of the 21st century” or “blue gold.” The triple threat of an increasing global population, a growing middle class that consumes more water and a shrinking supply of fresh water has led to wider public knowledge and several important trends. First, in the endless search for higher profit margins, the private sector has identified an opportunity to not only enter the market, but to set precedent regarding the way water is perceived. The industry spends significant resources trying to convince consumers that water is a commodity for which people must pay market prices. Under the assumption that the private sector would increase the efficiency of management and delivery, the World Bank and other financial institutions have aided private-sector goals by making debt relief and loans conditional on private-sector involvement. However, private-sector efficiency is intrinsically tied to competition, and because water is a natural monopoly, subjecting it to the market will not bring the efficiency and downward pressure on prices that would typically be expected.

Second, we are seeing a widening chasm between the way urban and rural water systems are managed. Multinational corporations compete to sign five- to 30-year management contracts in urban areas where population density allows them to earn a profit. They have no interest in rural areas where too much infrastructure outlay would be required. In Tanzania, for example, while Biwater won a contract to deliver water services in Dar es Salaam, rural water provision was left to NGOs. Urban dwellers are stated soon to outnumber rural dwellers worldwide. In fact, UN Habitat says that the “urbanization of poverty” has been ignored because aid agencies have traditionally focused on rural areas. Regions need to develop integrated, sustainable management plans around watersheds that emphasize conservation and include both urban and rural water provision.

Corporations have used the freshwater crisis to propose that they are more efficient than publicly managed systems. It is now well known that agriculture uses 70% of global freshwater supplies, so while cost recovery proponents claim that higher urban tariffs will encourage conservation, any significant efficiencies would come from implementation in the agricultural sector. The world has seen one scandal after another where multinationals have not just failed, but left a huge mess behind—Cochabamba, Bolivia; Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; and Atlanta, Georgia, to name just a few. Even as multinationals point to some examples that they consider successful, profits are still exported, local and national sovereignty is still sacrificed, and transparency is still reduced. Better models exist.

So it was with this contextual backdrop that water activists at the Nairobi World Social Forum shared similar stories of increasing prices, poor quality and access, lack of community consultation and the encroaching threat of privatisation. Based on these common concerns, the AWN developed five core principles:

- To fight against privatisation and commercialisation of water
- To halt installation of pre-paid meters
- To promote alternatives
- To promote water as a human right
- To promote public investment in water

I recently spent three weeks travelling in Ghana, Kenya and South Africa to meet with partners of the AWN and see their work on the ground.

2. Ghana: The World Bank's Public-Private Partnership Display Model

Using the Washington Consensus template of liberalization, privatisation and deregulation, the World Bank began pushing the concept of cost recovery in Ghana in the mid 1980s. By 1998, in an effort to pave the way for privatisation that was scheduled for January 2000, the Ghana Water Company (GWC) increased water tariffs 140 percent and fired 1600 workers. The company also ceased making necessary upgrades under the belief that a private corporation would later take responsibility.¹ In response, activists united under the auspices of the National Coalition Against the Privatisation of Water (NCAP) and achieved some measure of victory. The Bank had initially proposed a 30-year lease contract, but eventually implemented only a five-year management contract in 2006. This contract, between Vitens (a Dutch company) and Rand Water (a South African company), was unusual in that both are public utility companies partnering as a for-profit entity in Ghana. Aqua Vitens Rand Limited (AVRL) brought in 12 foreign "experts" at a combined salary of \$15 million—\$3 million more than the salary cost of the 1600 fired Ghanians.

In the two years since the contract was signed, NCAP members have focused their efforts on documenting its failures and have called for cancellation of the contract. During a visit to Maamobi, a poor sprawling section of Accra, I heard community leaders describe how 60 percent of the community had once enjoyed piped water. Shortly before the management contract was officially signed, water pressure had decreased so much that the flow no longer reached their slightly elevated community. The absence of piped water has since opened the way for entrepreneurs to fill giant plastic reservoirs with trucked-in water and charge exorbitant prices. This means that children are now forced to spend time when they should be in school scouring neighbourhoods in search of water for their families. It is now common to see children wandering Accra with yellow jerry cans. In March, a young girl who was sent by her mother to find water was hit and killed by a car.

The Maamobi Hospital, unbelievably, functions without running water. Doctors perform surgery, nurses dress wounds and women give birth using their only available source of clean water—12-ounce plastic pouches purchased in bulk. Further complicating matters, sanitation drainage rarely functions. Women post-childbirth have taken to bathing in the hospital courtyard with no privacy and little dignity because the interior drainage system is non-functioning. When several parliamentarians visited the clinic in June, they made great promises, but as of yet, nothing has changed. Hospital administrators, once wary of being perceived as politically motivated, are now willing to come forward with their stories.

In Ashaima, as well, entrepreneurs have stepped in where AVRL has failed to provide and the government has failed to enforce. While a few residents have taps on their property, they say that water regularly ceases to flow for several days at a time. When it does flow, they fill giant containers to later sell to neighbours. Community members recounted stories of numerous people who have illegally connected to pipes. When caught, they negotiate bribes with the water company employees who come to investigate.

The GWC, charged with overseeing AVRL's performance, seems incapable of enforcing standards. GWC management once took a hard line in support of the contract, but their resolve now appears to be showing cracks. Managing directors expressed hope for knowledge transfer to local people and concern that without some form of private sector participation, Ghana would be unable to secure the necessary infrastructure financing. One of AVRL's central goals was to decrease the amount of unaccounted-for water from ten percent to five percent, but according to a 2008 GWC report, that number has actually increased. AVRL and GWC have also recently butted heads over an extensive list of promotions and accompanying salary increases that AVRL proposed.

In March, a major citywide water shortage led to street protests and upheaval across the city. At a press conference, AVRL responded by making the bizarre claim that they are a non-profit institution and that they had financing from the Dutch government for system expansion. According to a director, this angered the GWC, who responded that not only did they secure the financing, but that AVRL had no contractual obligation for system expansion. In this tense climate, NCAP continues to gather documentation of what

they see as a failed contract and to expand their network of community activists. They hope to succeed in abrogating the management contract before the five years conclude.

3. Kenya: A rural model to replicate

Water activists in Kenya are able to draw many lessons from their counterparts in Latin America, since their municipal water is still largely under public control. A Kenyan chapter of the Africa Water Network is developing parallel campaigns to address both rural and urban water needs. Both urban and rural systems suffer from poor quality, occasional shortages, and lack of community involvement. As in many parts of rural Africa, there are countless cases of well-intentioned governments, NGOs, individuals and multinationals who have installed pumps or wells but failed to either create a sense of local ownership or to teach basic maintenance. As a result, such pumps are often pillaged or left in disrepair.

In Uyoma, a peninsular community at the northern end of Lake Victoria, residents collectively manage the Uyoma Water Project, which serves upwards of 80,000 people. It is composed of nearly 400 kilometres of piping, 37 standpipes as communal distribution outlets and over 50 individual consumer points. Water is pumped uphill from Lake Victoria, filtered and then run by gravity to the distribution points.² Since the 1940s, the project had been community-managed, but during the 1970s, the Kenyan government assumed control of the project in keeping with the trend of providing free basic services. This didn't last long, and after the government lost interest the community languished without accessible fresh water for many years. Residents of Central Uyoma were forced to walk up to 15 kilometres to Lake Victoria for water, waterborne diseases skyrocketed and girls were forced to quit school to fetch water for their families.

In 1999, two community organisations, the CCFMC Women's Project and MCDP, partnered to conduct a participatory rural appraisal that would assess the possibility of rehabilitating the existing system to create a community-led water delivery system. The results of their appraisal indicated very clearly that previous projects had failed due to lack of both community participation and a sense of community ownership. The new system applied a web of community management through committees at the tank, sub-location, location and apex level, including an elected water board of two members from each location. Total ownership was instituted through both technical and fiscal management strategies. Select residents were trained in management and record-keeping, as well as technical maintenance. Perhaps most crucial, two thirds of revenue went back to system maintenance while one third was given to the local community to allocate as they saw fit. This ultimate sense of community ownership ensured that no part of the system was ever pillaged for personal use. Perhaps the greatest challenge has been keeping system expansion up to pace with a population that has tripled since its inception. The Uyoma Water Project has become a model for other rural communities and regularly receives visitors from other parts of Kenya who wish to replicate the system.

4. South Africa: the legal precedent

As is so often the case, South Africa has been a bellwether for trends that spread north across the continent. In a story that is now well-documented, free communal standpipes, which once stood throughout poor neighbourhoods of Soweto, Johannesburg, were replaced with prepaid water meters. In doing so, Johannesburg Water was following the dictates of the ANC ruling party, which was following the economic advice of the World Bank. Cost recovery, privatised delivery and decreased grants and subsidies are all components of the economic advice typically handed out in the water and sanitation sector. What was presented as a "water conservation" strategy actually deprived people of their most essential human need.

In 2000, the government of KwaZulu-Natal attempted to implement user fees. According to local press accounts, the resulting cholera outbreak affected over 12,000 people and killed over 50 after they were forced to drink free dirty water in lieu of unaffordable clean water. Not only are prepaid meters a violation of the national constitution, which recognizes water as a public good, but they impose major health and safety risks for entire communities. Perhaps the most tragic event occurred when a residential shack on

Vusimuzi Paki's property caught fire. As he rushed to put out the blaze, the meter ran out and as a result, two young children died inside. South Africa is second only to Brazil in terms of economic inequality. The installation of prepaid meters only in poor communities serves to reinforce class divisions and breed further tension.

In reaction to the forced installation of meters, citizens formed the Coalition Against Water Privatisation and, with support from the Anti-Privatisation Forum, began organising communities to resist meters and "re-appropriate" public water through the removal or destruction of meters. As a component of their campaign, the group filed a class action lawsuit in the Johannesburg High Court in 2005 with five Phiri residents named as plaintiffs. In his decision, Judge Tsoka sided with residents, saying, "To argue...that the applicants will not be able to afford water on credit and therefore it is 'good' for applicants to go on prepayment meters is patronizing. That patronization sustained apartheid: its foundational basis was discrimination based on colour and decisions taken on behalf of the majority of the people of the country as 'big brother felt it was good for them'." Prepaid meters have spread to metropolitan areas of Namibia, Swaziland, Nigeria and Tanzania. It is certain that politicians worldwide are closely watching South Africa's legal battle.

While Phiri residents and coalition members celebrated this first great victory, the ruling has been appealed and is expected to go to the highest court in South Africa. Coalition members continue to organise in metropolitan Johannesburg and around the country and are currently launching a national "Women and Water Campaign." They are using this experience in three distinct ways. First, is to solve the problem, i.e., to deliver clean and affordable water to the people who need it. Second, at the local level, they are using the water struggle to develop community leadership that will be capable of addressing future local injustice. Third, they are fortifying the reach and reputation of the organizations involved so that they will have more public power to wield in future struggles.

5. Conclusion

As privatization and water rights struggles mushroom across the African continent—most recently in Malawi—members of the Africa Water Network are working to share lessons and strategies to maintain water as a public good. While communication remains a major impediment, they are successfully networked with other global water activists including the Red VIDA in Latin America, the newly formed European Public Water Network, and a variety of activists in Asia and North America.

Viable public models exist and developing countries around the world are learning that the private sector models pushed by development banks are not always in their best interest. It's ironic that the U.S., as the largest World Bank contributor, has spent decades investing public funds in its own water and sewage systems. Even as federal funding has diminished, 85 percent of Americans still receive their water from publicly managed systems and the public reacts strongly against privatisation proposals.

Any sustainable system must equitably provide clean water at affordable cost, and profits should be reinvested at home. It must include conservation management of the watershed, coordination among agricultural, industrial and household users, and above all, real public input. History has shown that some things are simply too precious to be left to the market.

Endnotes

¹ International Monetary Fund. (2001) Ghana: Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility Policy Framework Paper, 1999-2001.

² Rubiik, George Misore. (2007) Uyoma Water Project: A case study of possibilities and challenges in community management of a rural water system.