

Research findings

Revisiting water utility subsidy in the City of Harare, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The study is theoretically grounded on the human rights approach to development which perceives the state as constitutionally obligated to protect its citizens. Most municipalities in Zimbabwe receive inadequate subsidy from the government hence their inability to provide basic services such as water. The study unveiled household water challenges experienced by residents of Harare. The results of the study highlighted that poor subsidy from government stimulated resource use inefficiencies and financially weak utilities which affect efforts to improve household water service. The study employed focus group interviews, observation and document analysis to establish the factors contributing to the poor household water service delivery system in Harare. What is new in this study is the rights based approach used to provide solutions to a confluence of factors contributing to poor service delivery in Harare. This study makes a substantive contribution towards thinking on key facets of the debate especially the distributional impact of subsidies for urban household water supply.

INTRODUCTION

Lack of financial support for utility service is a universal problem which is prevalent in the household water sector throughout the world (World Bank 2003). In Zimbabwe, as elsewhere in the world, concern is growing about the challenges of accessing clean household water services. The impact is felt not solely on the lives of millions of citizens but also on the national economy where the required percentage of economic growth rate has not been achieved. A review of literature on the Zimbabwean water system reveals that inadequate government subsidies tend to reinforce the low social and economic position of poor and marginalised citizens of Zimbabwe. Few disadvantaged citizens ever receive adequate water services in Zimbabwe. Intervention programmes to correct this situation have not achieved the state's goals in this regard.



The study considers at the extent to which the legal frameworks for water governance and subsidy in Zimbabwe enhance or constrain clean household water service delivery. The article provides an overview of various factors impacting on government subsidy and determines their relative influence on the efficient and effective provision of potable domestic water. It is perceived that a combination of factors such as corruption, greediness, old reticulation water infrastructure, economic crises, inadequate subsidy from the government, population growth and negligence affect water supply in Harare. The overall aim of the study is to highlight problems in the water sector which impede the delivery of quality water services in Zimbabwe.

The developing countries in Southern Africa are experiencing domestic water shortages due to the economic crises and Zimbabwe is no exception (Mupindu and Thakhathi 2012:74). Zimbabwe offers graphic examples of the challenges of domestic water service delivery in its cities. The study assesses cost-effective approaches to the financing and provision of urban water infrastructure services to the residents of Harare. According to United Nations (2010) over a decade has elapsed since world leaders committed themselves in 2000 to the achievement of Millennium Development Goals by the year 2015. Zimbabwe is a signatory to these goals. One of the MDG's, goal number 7, focuses on ensuring environmental sustainability through achieving target number 10: recognising people without sustainable access to safe household water in urban areas by 2015.

Strengthening the provision of clean domestic water services to the urban community through an increase in government subsidy can also contribute to rebuilding the legitimacy of the state and to strengthening municipal engagement. The quality and availability of quality household water to the urban population, including the underprivileged are a key measure of good governance.

Several socio-economic problems in Zimbabwe can complicate subsidy levels from the government and impact severely the quality of domestic water service delivery in urban areas. The incentives for household water service delivery may be impaired by lack of government capacity to provide reasonable subsidies to the municipalities; lack of government willingness; or the breakdown of the social order through conflict. It is usually the poor who are affected, whether by failures of the public sector or those of the market since the rich consumers are able to sink boreholes as an alternative plan for the provision of water to individual households.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the data that was collected by the researchers from the eight randomly selected residential areas under Harare municipality in Zimbabwe. These include Epworth, Mabvuku, Mbare, Highfields, Mufakose, Belvedere, Chisipiti and Borrowdale. The findings of this study show the interdependency of factors affecting household water service delivery. Data was collected through fieldwork. Fieldwork in this instance refers to the designing, planning and management of the scientific investigation of problems in real life setting (Marshall and Rossman 1995).

This article employed the case study research design as a strategy of inquiry and also used questionnaires, focus group interviews, observations and document analysis during the

data collection process. The observations and document analysis were used to determine the extent of the problem which was then substantiated with information obtained through questionnaires and focus group interviews. Data collected through questionnaires and focus group interviews can be more objectively and scientifically analysed (Babbie & Mouton 2007).

Eight residential areas were visited and 150 questionnaires were distributed to the respondents. The researchers conducted six focus group interviews with the respondents from the high density areas since those from the low density suburbs were difficult to group together due to their differences in social class.

The researchers administered the data collection instruments with the help of four research assistants. Two of the research assistants were students from the University of Zimbabwe. The other two were also students from the Women University in Africa. All the research assistants had passed a research methods module and were fluent speakers of both Shona and English.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A long outstanding proposal to recognise the right to water as a basic universal human right is threatening to split the world's rich and poor nations (Hellum 2001). Overall, water and poverty alleviation are critical issues on which scholars must work towards a consensus. Anything less than consensus would undermine the importance researchers attach to them. It is not an exaggeration to state that the lack of access to clean water is one of the greatest human rights violations in the world as indicated by the fundamental human rights enshrined in the UN Charter (Klug 1997). The world is on track to reach the Millennium Development Goals on access to clean household water (Hellum 2001).

A new World Bank report states that by 2030, global demand for household water as a human right will exceed supply by 40 percent. This is a shocking prediction that foretells of terrible suffering (Barlow 2001). A binding UN convention states that no one should be denied domestic water because of an inability to pay. However, consumers must also remember that the issue of failing to pay water tariffs is not a human right. They should pay the tariff in order to complement the subsidy from the government and obtain satisfactory water service delivery. The objective is always to balance socio-economic interests and legality to produce developmental efficacy.

The researchers argued that the water policy accommodates consumers in theory because every municipality has a client charter concerning the water policy. The problem is operationalising it through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and providing adequate subsidy from the government towards improving household water services. However, the MDGs fail to recognise that poverty is a function of human rights violations; such as the lack of access to basic services, discrimination and inequality (Cullet 2006). For the purpose of this study, the MDGs conceive access to water not as a non-negotiable and universal right, but as a *need* to be met through government subsidy. The study argues that the water policy is silent about the poor who find it difficult to pay water tariffs and this affects the capacity of municipalities to provide services using the little subsidy obtained from the government.



The researchers recognise that the water policy does not accommodate the human rights of the poor because of exorbitant water tariffs which the underprivileged consumers can not afford to pay and yet it is the right of every human being to access domestic water. This position is supported by both implicit and explicit pre-existing human rights documents already acknowledged by the international community (Gleick 1999:472).

Several covenants and international agreements, such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the Declaration on the Right to Development; the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the European Convention on Human Rights suggest that water is a fundamental resource necessary to guarantee rights to water, food, human health and development (Gleick 1999:490).

By recognising access to water as a fundamental human right, states and governments are obligated to take positive action through increasing the subsidies to the municipalities to ensure that citizens are entitled to and receive the minimum amount of water for drinking, cooking and domestic use (Gleick 1999; Mehta 2003). Although various narratives express how water should be conceptualised, managed and allocated, most water management documents and policy papers offer a synthesis of access to water as a fundamental human right and water as an economic good. This generally entails liberalising the water sector and pricing water to reflect its market value while creating targeted subsidies to provide a minimum amount of water to meet the basic needs of the *poor* (Walker 2006:2).

The above discussion is a reflection of the principles agreed upon at international conferences concerning environment and development, such as the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development of 1992, Agenda 21 of 1992, and the Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development of 1992. The Dublin principles are particularly important since water policy documents recognise water as a social and economic good. Further, water management should be decentralised and user based. Water should be managed within an integrated framework, drawing a balance between efficiency, insurance of basic needs, and environmentally sound management. These principles reflect an attempt to adhere to liberal economic thinking on international development policy voiced by international actors such as the IMF and the World Bank with broader human rights concerns (Hellum 2001:2).

According to Mehta (2003: 567), powerful actors shaping global water policies tend to reject conceptualising water as a human right. Accepting water as a human right implies that it is a global public good and not a narrowly defined commodity. Additionally, *water rights* require governments and donor organisations to guarantee a minimum amount of water to meet the basic needs of its citizens.

Water as an economic good is not antithetical to water as a human right. Cosgrove and Rijsberman (2000:2) attempt to raise global awareness of the water crisis and potential solutions for addressing it. The objective of integrated water management is to empower communities to negotiate access to safe water as a human right. In order to accomplish this objective, there must be a shift to allow for the full pricing of water and, because of its scarcity, water must be treated as an economic good (Cosgrove and Rijsberman 2000: 3). Regardless of the emphasis placed on stakeholder involvement, the World Water Vision (WWV) implies that water users do not value water. Therefore, subsidised services, in particular, encourage users to devalue and subsequently waste water (Cosgrove and Rijsberman 2000:6).

Subsidies obscure the high value of water and do not give users the proper incentives to conserve it (Cosgrove and Rijsberman 2000:19). This argument rests on weak assumptions

that economic incentives are the only mechanisms motivating people's behaviours. Furthermore, this line of argument is often used by numerous actors to promote the *enclosure* of common-pool resources through privatised ownership, which is believed to provide the proper incentives for managing and conserving the resource.

The municipalities deserve to recover the incurred costs through collecting revenue from the consumers in the form of water tariffs and subsidy from government. The money is used for renovation and maintenance of the Harare Municipality water system's infrastructure. The study also established that the economic crisis affected the degree of attention given to the consumers. The harsh economic situation affected the client charter because consumers' rights were no longer considered. Yet, the consumers are the main players in any type of discourse concerning household water service delivery.

The study confirmed that there has been a breakdown of service delivery because of the economic crisis prevailing in a water scarce country. The ongoing reforms in Zimbabwe reflect an attempt to merge economic philosophies with concerns of human rights and equitable access to water (Derman, Ferguson and Gonese 2000). This reflects the government's dilemma of financing the water sector while ensuring people receive water for basic needs. As Hellum (2001:10) contends, "the right to livelihood in terms of water for basic needs is given high priority in Zimbabwe's new Water Act". Under Zimbabwe Government's new Water Act (1998), subsidised water for domestic purposes is classified as primary and thus available to everyone.

A rights-based approach to development sets the achievement of human rights as a goal of development. It uses thinking about human rights as the scaffolding of development policy. It invokes the international apparatus of human rights accountability in support of development action. Further, a rights-based approach is based on the values, standards and principles captured in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent legally binding human rights conventions and treaties; civil and political rights and social, economic and cultural rights should simultaneously be advanced in a rights based approach to delivery of basic services including water (United Nations Development Programme 2000).

There is consensus among the various theorists on the rights-based approach that the full realisation of human rights should be a vital goal of all service delivery efforts through the provision of adequate government subsidy to the municipalities. The approach canvassed in this study, therefore, perceives human rights as essential components of the promises of service delivery, including access to safe domestic water in the context of the MDGs. The rights-based approach emphasise equality and non-discrimination; accountability and transparency; and popular participation (Olowu 2008:77). The right to water applies primarily to affordable water of acceptable quality and quantity for domestic use.

In other African countries such as Ghana, the rights-based approach places particular emphasis on the involvement of human beings in the processes through which policy goals are determined and implemented, and could help in eliminating conflicts among stakeholders in the water sector (Olowu 2008:82). The rights-based philosophy for water use implies that the people themselves have the democratic authority to make decisions about water. Domestic water should be accessible to every human being as a human right. At least 165 states have signed declarations recognising the right to water and 118 members of the Non-Aligned Movement as well as 47 members of the Council of Europe have recognised the right to water in international declarations (Louka 2006).

Since Africa, East and South Asia and Latin America contain the vast majority of people lacking access to a basic quality water, it is important for all states to support efforts towards international recognition of the rights to water. Such international recognition will facilitate international cooperation to support national efforts to realise the rights of those denied access to clean household water. "Everyone has the right to an adequate standard of living including adequate food, clothing, housing, water and sanitation" (United Nations Development Programme 2000).

Therefore, the states need to be committed to promoting the rights of citizens to access safe water and sanitation through subsidy from the government. According to Sano (2000), "A person has a right to safe drinking water and basic sanitation as a basic human right and a fundamental aspect of human security." The importance of water is recognised as a vital and finite natural resource, which has an economic, social and environmental function, and acknowledged the right to water for all.

FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The study indicates that a training gap exists within the water authorities since a number of them confirmed that they were not familiar with the water policy. It is argued that this could be solved through conducting training workshops and seminars with other Zimbabwean municipal authorities, and even extending this beyond the country's borders. The training should include the rights-based approach to water governance in Africa. During the focus group interviews, the respondents indicated that Harare City Council is experiencing erratic water supply due to a number of factors. These factors include old, malfunctional water reticulation infrastructure, high demand, increase in population and frequent pipe bursts leaving residents without clean household water supply for days.

Harare City Council is expected to address this problem which has been made worse by the outbreak of water borne diseases such as cholera and typhoid. The most affected people are residents from the City's western and southern suburbs because they sometimes spend a week without running water due to major pipe bursts at the city's Morton Jaffray Water Treatment Plant. The focus group respondents revealed that the situation is ranging from worse to critical since the residents of Harare are now resorting to fetching water from unprotected wells and the Mukuvisi River. This health hazard is becoming worse since there are few public boreholes in Harare's residential areas.

Suffice it to say, Harare City Council should drill boreholes as an alternative source of water to the residents of Harare. According to responses from the water authorities, Harare council's water supply system is currently struggling to cope with a population increase estimated at more than 2,5 million and yet it was initially designed for 300 000 people. Therefore, much of the infrastructure is too old to cope with the increased demand resulting in frequent breakdowns. The contributing factor could also be limited resources to address the problem as evidenced by the limited subsidy from the government. The Harare Municipal authority confirmed that approximately US\$250 million is needed to rehabilitate the city's water treatment works and delivery infrastructure. However, the residents of Harare observed that the local authority is wasting scarce funds on luxury vehicles for officials instead of addressing the problems which the city is currently facing.

The residents of Harare are uninformed about the disbursement of money they pay as rates, given that they are not assured of clean household water. The study confirmed that there is a need to meet with the authorities and the City's water department to address this problem. All the money received through water rates should be used for water management infrastructure. What is more disturbing and ironic is the fact that Harare household water is the most expensive and yet it is seldom available.

Domestic water shortage in Harare has resulted in consumers digging shallow wells. This has in turn led to the outbreak of cholera, dysentery and diarrhea. Pollution of raw water sources led to the increase in water production costs as more chemicals are needed for the treatment of water. Harare City council has no financial resources to rehabilitate the water treatment plant and improve the reticulation of water production distributing systems.

Based on the empirical evidence and the review of related literature, it was found that the problem of poor household water service delivery system was deep rooted and multifaceted. Most respondents agreed that consumers need to pay their water bills and sufficient government subsidy should be allocated to the municipalities in order to ensure an acceptable quality water service delivery. The study established that both the rich and poor consumers appreciated the notion of introducing a water service delivery policy which accommodates the poor through government subsidy. The state needs to intervene by subsidising water delivery to the poor.

It is necessary to consider sustainability and maintenance of the water service infrastructure as well as the cost of purifying water incurred by the Harare Municipality. Repairing the facilities, paying for raw water from the Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA), buying purifying chemicals including chlorine and paying for electricity from the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA) requires money. Further, infrastructure services such as electricity, water and sanitation play a critical role in a country's development and are all directly and indirectly linked to living standards and economic growth (Olowu 2008:65). It is interesting to note that although it is the right of every human being to access clean household water, finance is required.

The human rights approach does not advocate free domestic water for the poor. The Municipality has a duty to perform after accessing subsidies from the government and it is the right of the consumer to complement or reciprocate that duty through the payment of tariffs. The study confirmed that Harare municipality is financially incapacitated due to urban poverty and the economic crisis in the country. Furthermore, pricing and water rights should be organised with principled pragmatism. This entails ensuring that users take financial and resource costs into account when using water and realising that solutions need to be tailored to specific, widely varying natural, cultural, economic and political circumstances (World Bank 2003:22). During focus group interviews with the water authority, it emerged that the use of hosepipes for gardening and car washing is uneconomical. It does not correspond with the rules and regulations of the municipality water rationing and conservation policy. The researchers observed that water is lost through some hosepipes which are connected and left unmonitored. This promoted a high rate of water consumption. Therefore, the more water consumed the greater the tariffs to pay.

During focus group interviews, the water experts indicated that, "The chemicals used to purify the water are purchased using the ratepayers' or the consumers' money". The consumers themselves are the ones responsible for paying the water wasted. The



researchers conclude that this is what causes the household water to be expensive because if the infrastructure was in a good condition no domestic water would be cheaper. This finding augurs well for consumers who are indirectly paying for water lost through burst pipes and leakages. The researchers argued that the water authorities do not accommodate the consumers as the most important participants in water service delivery. The rights of the consumers must be at the centre of the a good household water service delivery system.

The study established that consumers were given notice before domestic water disruptions. However, the notices were inconsistent with the circumstances of ordinary people. The municipal administrators concentrate on the business community at the expense of the ordinary consumers. The researchers deduced that big companies and low density residential areas were notified, where the prominent people of the Harare community resides. Therefore, few ordinary consumers access this information.

The study recommends that consumers must be given notices before household water disruptions so that they can prepare in advance. The data captured, indicates that the water authorities know how to account for water lost through burst pipes. They were clear that it should be paid by consumers indirectly. The perspective of the discussion is that this is not fair and is a violation of human rights. The point is that consumers do not cause water leakages. It is therefore surprising to learn that they are now required to pay and yet some struggle to pay the ordinary water charges. The study reveals that this decision is taken by the water experts after failing to rectify the household water problem due to urban poverty and inadequate subsidy from the government.

In the respondents' opinion proper management of corruption activities and social policy would create and increase the economic opportunities of the urban poor in the city of Harare. The reduction of urban poverty empowers many consumers through increasing their ability to pay water tariffs. It is alleged that financial charges may be supplemented with an economic charge in water scarce catchments and thus promote the efficient allocation and beneficial use of domestic water (Zimbabwe Government 1998). The National Water Pricing Strategy is underpinned by the theory of supply and demand. It is perceived that, in areas where meter readings are done, some of the residents complain that the readings are not done regularly and consumers are sometimes sent estimated invoices.

These estimated invoices affect the poor consumer who struggles to raise money for normal water charges. Pre-paid water meters (PPWM) have had devastating social consequences in Britain where they were subsequently banned in 1998 (Drakefords 1998:595). This raises an important question: if these meters were found to be harmful in Britain, based upon empirical evidence where the poorest are better off than the poor in Harare, is it not possible that they may pose a serious threat in the Harare, especially against the background of worsening socioeconomic conditions over the past decade (Sinske 2002).

Some of these water meters are estimated to be over 70 years old. According to the Harare Municipality maintenance officials (2012) these meters are expensive to maintain especially during this period of economic crisis in Zimbabwe. It is also reported that vandalism of meters is common and meter boxes need to be installed. This implies that the price of domestic water is assumed to be relatively higher in clean water-stressed areas than in areas of abundance. Plumbing works and maintenance of the reticulation systems should be of the required standards to avoid water wastage through leaks.

The household water leaks at the reticulation network deserve to be fixed as soon as they occur. Most leaks appear to have been going on for a long time. This study also confirms the durability of the plumbing materials used in the drainage system of the houses of Harare residents. It is also perceived that late water cuts have become a common phenomenon in Harare Municipality. Residents of Harare urban areas are, however, well-informed of the potential benefits of being involved in the management and monitoring of the domestic fresh water service delivery system.

First-rate water service delivery encourages consumers to pay their tariffs on time. These economic charges for clean water reflect the long-run marginal cost of supply and distribution, and prevent household water from being overused by those fiscal sectors that add relatively little subsidiary economic output. Zimbabwe is heading towards a situation of absolute domestic clean water scarcity by 2025 to 2030. Supreme scarcity is perceived as a situation where water demand for household use exceeds the rate of supply. Harare municipality is believed to be struggling to meet the household water service delivery needs and demands of its residents, especially the urban poor.

It appears that the consumers need to treat domestic water as a basic commodity with input costs. Government can then, at a later stage, gradually cancel the subsidy. Since 1998 most of the subsidies have been used towards extending basic clean water services to previously disadvantaged communities who were excluded from such a service in the past. District councils ensure that funds are raised for the household water development needs of more than one local authority. Local authorities focus particularly on the metering and management of clean water within municipal boundaries.

It is assumed that the consumers comprising both poor and rich must pay for access to clean water for domestic use. Market based allocations are able to respond more rapidly to changing conditions of supply and also tend to lower the water demand, conserve fresh water for household use and consequently increase both the robustness and resilience of the household water supply system. If they are in arrears, the poor are not able to access consistent domestic water services because the water authorities sometimes disconnect the water system. It is therefore important to complement the arguments above with a discussion of social policy.

Harare's experience of household water sector development can be compared to the model of African's sector development based on state subsidies and donor finance with limited focus on sustainability. A reasonably speedy recovery is possible if there is a favourable political environment, a large injection of finance and prioritisation of the sector. There is need for generation reforms encompassing: leadership, role allocation, capacity building and improving sector governance and stakeholder consultation; shifting government's role from that of implementer to facilitator; filling key policy gaps and amending policies to improve sustainability; assisting service providers to become financially viable; improving donor-government alignment; and putting in place sector monitoring and annual review processes.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Understanding access problems is essential for designing government interventions to improve household service delivery to the poor. Robust interventions aligned to the state



may make it possible to address sources of vulnerability for the poor community. Improved domestic water service delivery can be a catalyst for broader transformation for the poor through revisiting the water utility subsidy in Zimbabwe. The provision of basic services like household water can break the intergenerational cycle of poverty, increase economic opportunity and promote cooperation across socio-economic lines. The councils in Zimbabwe should have a back-up plan such as having water bowsers.

This study is a resource for policy makers, utility regulators, and sector practitioners who are considering ways to make household water services accessible and affordable to consumers. It will also be of significant concern to those who view consumer utility subsidy as a means of transferring resources to the urban community in African countries including Zimbabwe. Delivering household water services should be a top priority in Zimbabwe so that the state can make progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The study recommends that the government of Zimbabwe, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), other companies and the business community should intervene in the water provision dilemma in order to assist the Municipality of Harare to improve the household water service delivery system. It is also recommended that underprivileged consumers and incapacitated service providers such as Harare Municipality should be at the centre of the debate in order to come up with solutions concerning household water problems in Africa.

Harare Municipality must have some networking with other municipalities in Africa and beyond in order to access assistance in the form of donations from Non-governmental organisations and the international business community. The state and non-governmental organisations must intervene to address the problem of urban poverty which affects the household water service delivery system. It is recommended that Harare Municipality should liaise with the business community that could potentially assist in cash, or in kind, so that urban poverty is reduced. Furthermore, economic incentives must be used to encourage people to invest in the conservation and use of water resources. The state still has an important role to play in protecting its citizens' rights of access to affordable subsidised services. In addition to strong public or private partnerships, there must also be strong relations between the central government, lower tiers of government, and administration.

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