

Water the most indispensable commodity of all

**Speech of Phides Mazhawidza, Africa Gender & Trade Network (GENTA)
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Introduction

Water is life, hence every human being should have access to clean water. It is a basic human right.

My paper is supposed to focus on Privatisation of Water in Zimbabwe and other Southern Africa countries in which case I have chosen South Africa and Lesotho. It will focus on the impact of privatisation of water on women and what alternatives are there. I have chosen to talk more on Zimbabwe for the mere reason that I am more familiar with the situation as well of late Zimbabwe has gone through drastic changes and are still in the process of change.

Zimbabwe a landlocked country

Given the fact that Zimbabwe is a landlocked country and that its main source of water are seasonal rainfalls, it is only appropriate that it is managed well.

The main instrument guiding the development of the water sector in Zimbabwe is the Water Act of 1976 which was repealed in 1998. This Act stipulated that water is a National Resource that cannot be owned by an individual. As thus, water in Zimbabwe is Government owned, using Local Authorities as implementing agencies. This structure has been adopted by most Southern African countries with a few exceptions as will be cited in the following paragraphs.

One of the main reasons for repealing the Water Act of 1976 was “the granting of Water Rights in perpetuity”. The principle that was used was that of “first come first in right principle”. What this effectively meant was that the holder of the rights can pass them on down to generations, prohibiting new entrants into the area access to water. They had to pay for it at a cost determined by the Rights holder creating

conflicts between the Water Rights holder (who was in most cases the white commercial farmer), and the local communities. This was experienced mostly in years of drought when the local communities water wells dried up, forcing them to seek for alternative water sources.

The Water Rights were changed to water Permits which have a fixed period of time which is renewable. The new act abolished the concept of private water and introduced Stakeholder Institutions, giving them the responsibility to manage water at all levels.

Thus the establishment of catchment and sub-catchment areas.

Water usage distribution in Zimbabwe:

SECTOR		% of use
Agriculture		80
Industrial and Mining		9
Urban		11
TOTAL		100

Source: Department of Water Development

Where are the women

69% of the Zimbabwe population resides in the rural area with 52% of them being women. (figure before the 2000 Land Reform program). Their source of water are wells and boreholes where not available it's rivers and swamps. Every day an

average family of 6 people use 60 litres of water to meet the basic domestic consumption.

During the process of repealing the 1976 Act in 1998, women who are the consumers of 89% of primary water were not consulted. Quoting from the government document “Towards Integrated Water Resources management”, a water resources strategy of Zimbabwe (2001) it says “the process of developing the Water Act and the water strategy was gender blind!”. Now they have to leave with this. In essence what this means is that women were not consulted. This is not an isolated situation, it's the every day occurrence.

Water Permits were granted to white commercial farmers without consulting the surrounding communities. Hence they will be levied to use the water which will be clean and closer to them. Failure to have the money will be forced to walk long distances to access free water (indirect privatisation).

Dams are being constructed for irrigation purposes on rivers which supply water to the local communities. Local communities are not allowed to access the dam water for their every day needs – forcing women to use dirty water from rivers and swamps, with the only other alternative being to walk on average 3km to fetch water for consumption.

In urban settlements, water is charged per cubical. Each household has running water and the local Town Board (Municipalities) bills them at the end of each month. The price of water is based on an administered pricing system.

The pricing systems incorporates the user pays system, based on full cost recovery to ensure financial viability. This strategy includes a combination of fees levies and tariffs, covering the full cost of services provided in the water sector, including future developments of water supplies.

Failure to pay the price results in water services being disconnected.

Why privatize water?

The United Nations in their Millennium Development Goals (MDG) when it was issued 3 years ago said it aims to reducing by half the proportion of people without access to clean drinking water by 2015. This was endorsed in 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD).

Economists like privatisation saying it brings efficiency on the delivering of water. On the face of it, it makes sense as the adequate supply of water in most developing countries is frustrated or hampered by lack of funding, inefficient bureaucracy or lack of political will.

The other argument that is used by the promoters of water privatisation, is that it attracts investors as the operating environment will be conducive as well as cost effective.

But the question that one asks is who is to benefit from this investment, all the profit will go to the investor with government only receiving tax. Tax which will not be enough to meet the national social needs. Private investment is not attracted by poor and rural communities that is not their goals. Theirs is to make a profit.

In the case of Lesotho, an International Multinational Corporation has been granted water rights to harvest water from the natural spring on the range of Lesotho mountains. The whole blue belt is now owned by them and are bottling the water for export. The Lesotho government with pressure from the World Bank and IMF for "AID" justified this by saying the water has been going to waste for centuries but now they are being paid for it.

"How much? At what cost to the local communities and the nation at large.

The argument that is being put across by the nationals is ...why give this to a foreign company ... why not borrow money from World Bank or IMF to finance the Basutho Nationals operate the water exporting business. This will economically empower them with the resources remaining in the country for future developments.

Now local people are fenced out of the area. Where they for decades used to draw fresh clean water, are being asked to pay.

...In this case who is privatization for?

In Soweto, South Africa, running water is available but at a cost. They have a system of allowing a certain number of cubic metres free per month after which it will be charged. The price policy does not differentiate between the rich and the poor urban dwellers, or between productive (industrial water) and non-productive (domestic water).

Failure to pay the water bill will result in services being disconnected. It was reported that approximately 20 000 households have their water supplies disconnected every month.

This raised three problems :-

- * that women will be forced to walk distances to a public well to get water for domestic use;
- toilets will be blocked posing a serious health hazard (i.e. water borne disease);
- some people will force the taps open, by vandalising the system which will be costly to repair and restore it to normal functional state.

Alternatives

1. If water is to be used effectively and efficiently for the benefit of all, decision making processes must involve all stakeholders.
2. Women should be involved at all levels and be active participants. Be it at Policy formulation level, they must be sensitised, knowledged and informed to be ale to be participants at this level.

3. Women must form the core group of people in Local Authority Boards. (be on the discussion table)
4. A study to determine the number of women who have knowledge of water Acts/Policy be conducted in Southern Africa for purposes of developing intervention strategies.
5. Water Acts, water policies and regional water agreements must be analysed and repackaged into simple language (not technical) and written in the local language for the benefit of the women.
6. A mechanism to be put in place which ensures that our Governments implement the agreements that they sign at various regional and international forums. (accountability)