From self-help group to water company: The Wandiege Community Water Supply Project (Kisumu, Kenya)\(^1\)

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Water services in urban Africa are generally in a bad state and low-income neighbourhoods are not usually connected to the municipal water supply and infrastructure. The Kenyan government attempted to address these problems with its Water Act of 2002 and by creating water and sewerage companies. This chapter recounts how this idea was adopted and transformed by people in the Wandiege neighbourhood of Kisumu town who improved their local water and sanitation situation by setting up their own water supply system in an innovative way.

Introduction

Water is a basic human right as it is fundamental to life and is vital for socio-economic growth and development at all levels, from the national level to that of the individual. Access to water (and sanitation)\(^2\) is a key factor in improving people’s health, economic productivity and social well-being as both social and economic activities rely heavily on the quantity and quality of the water available. Access to water is thus an

\(^1\) Comments by Moses Mwangi, André Leliveld and Iva Peša on an earlier version of this chapter are highly appreciated.

\(^2\) This chapter predominantly focuses on water but sanitation issues cannot be totally ignored.
essential component of any attempt to alleviate poverty. Yet in achieving this target, ‘Sub-Saharan Africa remains the area of greatest concern. It is a region of the world where, over the period 1990-2004, the number of people without access to drinking water increased by 23%’ (WHO/Unicef 2006: 3). Moreover, the region experienced an 85% increase in its urban population in the same period but the number of urban dwellers that had no access to safe drinking water doubled (Ibid.).

A major reason for poor access to water services in Sub-Saharan Africa is the inefficiency of water utilities, especially those serving urban areas. Many systems are characterized by high water losses, inadequate revenue to cover operating costs, dilapidated and poorly functioning infrastructure, a lack of investment, low billing and collection efficiency, chronic water shortages, failure to meet existing demands, low coverage (especially for the urban poor) and corruption (World Bank 2004).

Kenya is one of the few countries in the world where urban drinking water coverage from improved sources actually declined between 1990 and 2004 (WHO/Unicef 2006: 15). Its urban water supply situation can best be summarized as follows: ‘[the] water supply in Kenyan cities is highly inequitable. Over 50% of the urban poor, living in slums, have no access to safe drinking water and end up paying vastly more for municipal piped water’ (UN-Habitat 2005: 5). The Water Services Regulatory Board provides a gloomier picture: ‘In the low-income settlements where an even majority of the urban poor live, only 20 per cent of the population have access to safe water, exposing them to relatively high tariffs charged by water vendors’ (WASREB 2008: 1). A study carried out in Nairobi, Mombasa and Kakamega in 2000 concluded that ‘the current water supply situation [in these three urban centres] is dismal’ (Gulyani et al. 2005: 27) and another study undertaken in Kenya’s three largest cities – Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu – in 2006 showed similar results (Citizens Report Card 2007). A comparison of the ‘poor’ and the ‘non-poor’ revealed that there are distinct inequities in access to mains connections, with the poor reporting less access. The difference is particularly dramatic in Kisumu, where only 7% of the poor reported having access to mains connections, compared to 81% of the non-poor.

Supported by western donors, the Kenyan government has made various attempts to reform its water sector since the 1970s but the results have been unsatisfactory.3 According to GTZ, the German donor organization,

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3 For an overview, see Owuor & Foeken (2009).