



Participants or customers in water governance? Community-public partnerships for peri-urban water supply



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ABSTRACT

We examine the performance of water user associations (WUAs) and the role of actors, power relations, socio-institutional dynamics, and context in supplying water to poor urban and peri-urban neighborhoods of Malawi's two major cities. Using a preliminary survey, key-informant interviews, focus groups, secondary data, and insights from the community-based natural resources management (CBNRM) literature and common-pool resources (CPR) theory, we argue that while a business-based WUA model can enhance water supply and access, the urban/peri-urban and historical context alters the nature of water and social actors and power relations involved, causing tradeoffs between water-supply and social goals of ownership, participation, and empowerment. The ensuing tradeoffs demonstrate that water supply to the urban/peri-urban landscape through community-based initiatives require flexibility in CBNRM expectations.

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1. Introduction

Lack of access to potable water is a global problem affecting nearly 800 million people. Although progress has been made toward addressing the problem, including through the Millennium Development Goal of halving the proportion of people without access to potable water by 2015, many countries still lag behind. Only a third of Sub-Saharan Africa's (SSA) population has access to piped water within household (Seager, 2010). Millions rely on unsafe water sources, with grave economic and health consequences, including 2.4 million annual deaths in all developing countries (Bartram and Cairncross, 2010) mainly from diarrhea (1.8 million) in children aged 1–5 (UN Human Development Report, 2006). In peri-urban areas the quest to improve water access is hampered by multiple factors including insecure and uncertain land tenure, poor or lack of piped-water infrastructure, and dense populations characterized by poverty. Neglect by and poor capacity of central and municipal government authorities complicate water provision (Kalulu and Hoko, 2010; Marston, 2014).

Government utility agencies and private companies often have no financial incentives to provide water to both rural and poor

peri-urban areas given the high upfront financial and infrastructural investments, with no guarantee of cost recovery. Terrain, unplanned settlements, and dispersed poor populations compound the problem and undermine economic viability. Therefore private and public utility agencies tend to cherry-pick cities over rural areas, and wealthy urban over low-income and peri-urban neighborhoods where the poor pay more per unit of water and are often systematically marginalized and underserved even more than in rural areas (Swyngedouw, 2006; Bakker, 2013), lost in the socio-institutional and policy interstices between rural and urban. Some of these challenges reflect the unclear spatial boundaries of the 'peri-urban.' We define peri-urban as predominantly unplanned settlements within, and transitional areas along city boundaries characterized by low incomes, overcrowding, insecure land tenure, and lack of basic services including clean water and sanitation (Mbiba and Huchzermeyer, 2002).¹

With the failure of both public and private water-supply systems to improve supply and access for poor urban/peri-urban

¹ For cities in Malawi, peri-urban areas are called low income areas (LIAs). Iaquina and Drescher (2000/2) conceptualize the peri-urban as outcomes of socio-demographic processes linking urban and rural areas and classify them into five peri-urban (PU) types: village ("rural places with urban consciousness"), diffuse (areas proximate to a city settled through in-migration from diverse geographies and ethnicities), chain (areas in/near the city settled sequentially by ethnically homogeneous groups), in-place (in situ urbanization), and absorbed (residual). In-place, absorbed and diffuse were the main PU types in the study.

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communities, attention has turned to alternatives involving diverse partnerships among public, private, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and water-user communities, including community-based natural resources management (CBNRM) approaches, with added neoliberal decentralization and 'good governance' goals (Gutiérrez, 2007; Kalulu and Hoko, 2010). Growing international consensus also favors community-based over centralized public or privatized approaches for theorized benefits including participation, empowerment, autonomy/ownership, and sustainability (Cleaver and Toner, 2006). Despite the rhetorical appeal—even romanticization—of CBNRM, performance has generally been poor or at best mixed, prompting claims that CBNRM remains a hypothesis (e.g., by Tacconi, 2007). Still, growing interest in communities and the plight of the urban/peri-urban poor also reflects recent (2000s) major shifts in scholarly and policy debates on drinking-water supply and access from supply-to demand-driven and decentralized approaches, and from techno-scientific to more socio-political approaches that recognize the role of social and power relations and institutions in mediating water access (Ferguson et al., 2005; Bakker et al., 2008; Swyngedouw, 2009; Agnew, 2011).

However, CBNRM approaches have more traditionally been used in rural areas where they fill a void because private and public water provision seem financially unviable, and mainly to supply/manage surface and ground water for domestic use (e.g., wells and boreholes) or irrigation (Vasquez, 2004; Ghosh, 2007) and in managing other natural resources (Kazbekov et al., 2009; Blaikie, 2006). Their use for piped-water supply in (peri-) urban settings is nascent and little is known of their performance. To be sure, CBNRM approaches are no panacea in the rural areas where their relative costs and benefits remain uncertain (e.g., Blaikie, 2006; Dressler et al., 2010; Zulu, 2008). Still, while the few studies conducted in urban areas show some early promise on water-supply goals and challenges on broader social goals (Vasquez, 2004; WorldBank, 2006; Jimu, 2008; Opere, 2011; Marston, 2014), major gaps remain in how community-based water management plays out in peri-urban areas, and in particular, the potential of cost-recovery-based Water User Associations (WUAs) in Sub-Saharan Africa to improve access to water.

The objective of this study is to examine the potential of community-based water-supply systems to enhance water supply and broader community empowerment and socioeconomic benefits for poor urban and peri-urban households in SSA using the case of piped water supply from communal standpipes (water kiosks) through Water User Associations (WUAs) in the two major cities of Malawi—Blantyre and Lilongwe. The water kiosks are connected to public water systems managed by semi-commercial water boards (WBs). We specifically assess strengths, weaknesses and opportunities provided by the institutional arrangements adopted under this cost-recovery based WUA model which thrives on the financial contribution of users who pay for water per bucket in the peri-urban areas. These user fees are necessary to sustain the water-supply system (maintenance costs, employee salaries, and operational costs) and give water users the duo role of customers and members. We further examine the nature and impacts of power interactions among the main actors and institutions, their diverse motivations, and how the urban/peri-urban setting affects the nature of CBNRM, its tenets, and expected outcomes.

Malawi is a microcosm of acute challenges associated with water supply and broader social benefits to the urban poor in developing countries. Rapid population growth and extreme poverty exacerbate the challenge. Malawi's population more than tripled between 1996 and 2008—4.04 million to 13.1 million (GoM, 2008). In 2012, Malawi ranked 170 out of 187 countries based on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) (UNDP, 2013). Most (53%) Malawians live below the national

poverty line, mostly subsisting on agriculture (Nkhoma, 2011). Although some reports (WHO and UNICEF, 2014) claim 95% of Malawi's population has access to safe drinking water, only 30% has piped water on their premises, and 65% depend primarily on boreholes, dug wells and unprotected sources, while the majority in peri-urban areas depend on communal water kiosks (GoM, 2010) and some informal private-vendor sources, reflecting the regional scenario (Solo, 1999; Kjellén and McGranahan, 2006). The water kiosks are sparsely distributed, resulting in long walking distances and wait times. Residents pay for the water by the bucket, generally 20 liters in capacity. In July 2013, the cost per bucket was 12–15 Malawi Kwacha (US \$0.04–0.05), 4–5 percent of monthly income based on preliminary survey data.

Over 8800 adults and 4500 under-five children die annually in Malawi mainly from diarrheal diseases from using contaminated water, causing \$57 million in economic losses (WSP, 2010). Over 42 percent of households, mainly women and children, spend more than 30 min on average daily (maximum 6 h) collecting water (GoM, 2010). Yet national statistics lump rural and urban areas together, obscuring equally acute water-access challenges within peri-urban neighborhoods where extreme poverty forces many residents to still depend on unsafe water sources. Malawi, among a few developing countries, recently turned from largely failed top-down to community-based water governance for peri-urban water supply through WUAs.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. First, we discuss the historical evolution of WUAs and situate the study within the broader CBNRM and common pool resources literature (CPR). After a brief methodology, we present and discuss main findings focusing on institutional dynamics. These include organizational arrangements, user representation and participation, water politics and power relations among key actors, and WUA performance against water-supply and broader social goals, framed around CPR theory and institutional design principles. We finally discuss our findings and their implications before concluding.² We argue that community-based water governance through WUAs can enhance peri-urban water supply, but the urban/peri-urban context alters the mix of social actors and power relations in ways that undermine participatory-decision making and equitable-benefit sharing.

2. Community-based water governance approaches in developing countries

Water-policy reforms from government to community-centered approaches have gained momentum over the past two decades under decentralization and popular CBNRM prescriptions (Ferguson et al., 2005). Their emergence in urban settings is more recent. CBNRM not only offers an alternative to largely failed public and privatized water-supply approaches for the poor, and a means for cash-starved and mismanaged public agencies to externalize water-supply and system expansion costs to the users. It is also attractive for its underlying tenets, including community empowerment through user self-organizing into recognized local organizations, e.g., associations, committees, and cooperatives; formulating locally agreed operational rules on resource use and user behavior including sanctions (often contained in constitutions), and a management plan for the resource mutually agreed by key stakeholders; devolution to the local institutions of adequate legal resource rights, including decision-making powers and the economic incentives communities need to assume significant responsibility for sustained resource use; significant local

² More detailed empirical analysis of WUA impact on water access is underway.

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