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Water is life in a life without water: Power and everyday water practices in Lilongwe, Malawi

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ABSTRACT

While urban political ecology convincingly shows how social and technological power relations create inequalities between different areas of cities, inequalities within areas are largely ignored. Based on a case study in a low-income area in Lilongwe, Malawi, this article uses the micropolitics in the everyday practices of accessing, controlling and exploiting both formal and informal water sources to demonstrate how water is connected to social power. Different sources of power are distinguished to show the subtle power processes at play. Drawing on more informal sources of power, like a household's entrenchment in a web of social relations that impact the actions it can take, residents from low-income areas secure access to multiple sources of water, reproducing existing inequalities in time, efforts and finances needed. By highlighting that inequities in access to water exist not only *between* neighbourhoods, but also *within* low-income areas, we seek to contribute to the further development of the concept of inclusive development.

1. Introduction

In the title of this paper the struggle for water in Lilongwe is put forward. While Lilongwe Water Board (LWB), the semi-public water utility in the city, emphasizes the importance of water in its slogan 'water is life', the daily reality shows that water is scarce and difficult to access for many of the city's residents. Water supply in Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi, is characterized by stark inequalities in water flows between wealthy areas receiving substantial flows of water, and low-income areas suffering from frequent and long-lasting cuts in water provision through their so-called 'water kiosks'. The inequalities in water access in Lilongwe are not unique, but rather are mirrored in most cities in developing countries. In a frequently-cited metaphor Bakker (2003: 337) refers to urban water services in 'the South' as 'archipelagos', consisting of islands of networked water supply, in order to highlight how 'in the South water supply networks do not operate homogeneously over the urban landscape'. Wright-Contreras, March, and Schramm (2017: 64), for example, describe the 'fragmented landscape' of water provisioning in different neighbourhoods in Hanoi, Vietnam which lead to unequal access in different areas of the city. Hossain (2012: 70) alludes to the 'socio-spatial fragmentation' of access to water in Dhaka and the inequities that this creates in different parts of this city in Bangladesh.

1.1. Inclusive development and urban political ecology

The fragmentation and inequities of urban water supply in Lilongwe and other cities in developing countries are at odds with the concept of inclusive development that has gained popularity in recent years. Inclusive development 'emphasizes the social and environmental aspects of sustainable development' (Gupta, Pouw, & Ros-Tonen, 2015, p. 542). Inclusive development stresses that without an explicit focus on social, ecological and relational inclusiveness, development tends to be equated to economic growth and focuses more on social averages than on how the most vulnerable are affected (Gupta et al., 2015). The result is that deepening inequalities may be hidden by averages of economic growth which mainly benefit an urban elite. It should be emphasized that although this article focuses on inclusive development in Malawi, discussions on social inclusiveness and ecological inclusiveness also abound in industrialized countries (see Haase et al., 2017).

Urban inequalities have also been a main topic of research for urban political ecologists. As such, urban political ecology (UPE), through its focus on social and technological power relations, presents a useful lens through which to analyse inclusive development in low-income areas of Lilongwe. The field of UPE studies resource flows through cities, and especially the conflicts that result from unequal power relations between powerful and powerless actors. Management of water is considered neither neutral nor apolitical and, as such, leads to uneven

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access to water of different groups in society (Gandy, 2008; Swyngedouw, 1999, 2004; Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003). Nature and society are two spheres that are strongly interconnected (Swyngedouw, Kaika, & Castro, 2002). In this perspective, physical infrastructure is an important element in the analysis, as infrastructure is the medium through which ‘socio-natures’ are produced (Swyngedouw, 2007). Infrastructure is also an expression, and often a reconstitution, of power relations, fusing technology, nature and social power. Water flows and access to water are thus seen as an expression of larger political, economic, social and cultural struggles in society, since they are determined by a combination of hydrological processes and politicized human interventions (Bakker, 2010). These politicized interventions create inequalities between parts of the city that receive water in abundance and parts that lack formalized access to water.

UPE acknowledges the importance of power relations, and shows how water flows to the elites rather than to the poor. However, within UPE some elements have been under-researched thus far. First, urban political ecologists have mainly focused on water access *between* different areas of the city, but have paid less attention to inequities *within* neighbourhoods. The heterogeneity of water infrastructures and associated power-dynamics within neighbourhoods, the ‘micropolitics of every day access’ (O’Reilly, 2006; Truelove, 2011), remain under-researched. The analysis is further limited by a bias towards the formal water infrastructure, at the expense of alternative, informal sources that are used by many people in low-income areas (LIAs) (Lawhon, Ernstson, & Silver, 2014).

Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) has highlighted the complex ways in which different water sources (types, locations, quality, quantity, reliability and accessibility) have a direct bearing on the way water is accessed, controlled and exploited (Sultana, 2011; Truelove, 2011). Where control over water is mainly dictated by control over land and ownership of technology, access to water is mediated by broader social relations (Sultana, 2011, p. 165). Finally, the distinction that is often made by urban political ecologists between the haves and have-nots is too simple to analyse the complex and diffuse power flows that are at play at the neighbourhood level (Truelove, 2011). It has proven surprisingly difficult ‘to move from the grand displays of power represented in large-scale engineering works’, discussed in the UPE literature, ‘to the more subtle ways in which power works through everyday hydraulic practices’ (Ekers & Loftus, 2008, p. 709). Yet actual ‘city making’ and, as such, also processes determining patterns of in- or exclusiveness, occur as much through these everyday practices as it occurs through the infrastructural materiality and flows analysed in UPE (Lawhon et al., 2014).

Whereas most urban political ecologists and academics writing on inclusive development have focused on inequalities *between* different parts of the city in terms of unequal power relations, little attention has been given to inequalities *within* LIAs of the city (Truelove, 2011, p. 144). This paper addresses this gap by analysing the relational aspects influencing water access, control and exploitation in LIAs of Lilongwe. The article first discusses everyday practices as an approach to analysing the ‘micropolitics of everyday access’ in LIAs, then discusses power as being layered and diffuse and presents the methodology. It then details the different water sources available in the case-study area in Lilongwe, discusses the power dynamics in everyday practices around the water kiosks, private connections and the wells, and finally draws conclusions.

2. ‘Micropolitics’ of everyday access

Everyday practices are depicted as ‘mundane practices that shape the conduct of human beings towards others and themselves in particular sites’ (Nash, 2000, p. 655), or simply as ‘ways of operating’ (de Certeau, 1984: xi). In research related to water access, ‘everyday practices’ are often only defined theoretically, with little attention given to empirical analyses of daily water practices (as for instance in Ekers &

Loftus, 2008). Yet when defined as ‘multiple’, ‘repetitive’ actions that people engage in that enable water access to be managed and extended to those otherwise cut off from a secure supply’ (Peloso & Morinville, 2014, p. 122) everyday practices represent the ‘building blocks of social reality’ of accessing water (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1241). Decisions to use particular water sources, or not, are influenced by both a range of societal and relational factors as well as by individual decisions that have to be negotiated and re-articulated, commonly on a daily basis (Sultana, 2011, p. 166). Everyday practices, through its emphasis on ‘analytics that begin from below’, epitomize the enactment of power relationships at particular moments (Ekers & Loftus, 2008, p. 710). The analysis of everyday practices thus allows for the articulation of particular ‘relationships that explain the dynamics of everyday activities, how these are generated and how they operate within different contexts’ (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1241). The concept of everyday practices not only makes it possible to carefully analyse how individuals access different water sources and under which conditions. Everyday practices of accessing water also represent a strategic site for critiquing the inequalities in access to water that are created and reproduced through the enactment of power in this process, and therefore of patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

2.1. Power as layered and diffuse

Power is often perceived as operating in a top-down manner, which implies that some organizations, states or people ‘have’ power, and use it to influence the actions of those who do not (Wylie, 2006). In this view, power is the possession of a minority. This perception is also prevalent in many UPE studies, where a distinction is often made between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ (Roy, 2012). However, power can also be conceived as being ‘dispersed’ instead of being centralized. In this understanding ‘power is everywhere ... because it comes from everywhere’ (Foucault, 1981: 93 cited in Wylie, 2006, p. 304), or, put differently, is ‘residing nowhere but enacted everywhere’ (Lawhon et al., 2014, p. 809). UPE literature often focuses on the ‘rights’ to things, whereas a focus on the ability to access (water sources, institutions, people) broadens the attention to include the variety of relationships and processes that facilitate or constrain people.

Since access to water is never fully secure, households without their own water source have to navigate daily uncertainties. Navigating these uncertainties has a direct bearing on how people relate to each other in households and communities in competing for water from the same source. This influences social power relations in everyday life (Sultana, 2011, pp. 166–168). Bringing a Foucauldian notion of power into the field of water can add ‘another degree of sophistication’ (Ekers & Loftus, 2008, p. 701) to UPE, since both water itself and the associated water practices work to ‘distribute power through the capillaries of the water network’ (Ekers & Loftus, 2008, p. 710).

Ekers and Loftus’ contribution engages theoretically with notions of power in everyday hydraulic practices, but leaves unexplained what water practices work to distribute it. Social relations have a strong influence on how water is accessed, controlled and exploited. These social relations concern the embeddedness of individuals and households in a web of relationships founded on associations such as religious affiliations, family and neighbourhood ties, professional contacts, etc. (Schwartz et al., 2015). The layered hierarchies of power are felt most acutely by those seeking access to water without controlling their own infrastructures. How different groups negotiate access has an influence on the way everyday encounters take place at the water source (Sultana, 2011, p. 169). Without an operationalization of these processes, it is not possible to analyse the subtle and layered power relations that are at play at the neighbourhood level.

To analyse these power relations, the article moves beyond the binary understanding of the powerful versus the powerless, or the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’. We understand power not only as being dispersed or diffused, but also as being layered. While some actors in

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