



Fluid experiences: Comparing local adaptations to water inaccessibility in two disadvantaged neighborhoods in Niamey, Niger



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ABSTRACT

Institutional and governance reforms in the urban water sector in Niger have not translated into increased water access for residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods in Niamey. These disadvantaged neighborhoods have little in common besides their inaccessibility to water, and even this experience of lack of water differs greatly between places. This paper takes a small-scale approach to understanding water (in)accessibility, and shows that knowledge of local contexts are imperative for building malleable and sustainable solutions. Approaching water from a neighborhood scale, we show that location, tenure status, and age of settlement are poor predictors of access to piped water, but they continue to guide urban water policies and developments. In the gaps of local accessibility, water vendors provide services that leave room for local geographic and household contexts in ways that normative policy models fail to accommodate.

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Introduction

In 2001, water services in Niamey, Niger changed from being governed exclusively by the public sector to a partnership between the public and the private sectors. The aim of this reform was twofold—to increase the water supply rate to urban residents and to reach financial equilibrium so that the sector could be self-financing. The latter was met five years after the public–private partnership took effect, but the first objective remains an elusive goal. Water supply rates have increased since 2001, but only some neighborhoods have benefitted. Poor neighborhoods in Niamey remain marginalized and water access for residents in these neighborhoods continues to be difficult. An in-depth understanding of water access problems in Niamey reveals that rigidity in institutional reforms has not benefitted poor households or neighborhoods, and the diversity of poor neighborhoods necessitate different solutions for improving access to water.

Technical and economic standards of the institutional reform in Niger do not leave room for households in poor neighborhoods to

have deep and/or sustainable access to water, as they are built on assumptions of access and poor proxy measurements of land tenure status, location in the city, and age of settlement. Gandatché and Pays-Bas are two such neighborhoods in Niamey, characterized by high rates of poverty and low rates of accessibility to water. In examining Gandatché, we wish to show that the geographic position of a neighborhood is not synonymous with integration into the urban fabric. Gandatché is located in the central downtown district, but most residents here still rely on vendors and public standpipes for water services. Pays-Bas, on the other hand, has only one connection to the city's piped water network, despite the mobilization of the community members and leaders. Pays-Bas has been excluded from water service extensions because of its semi-legal land tenure status and inaccessibility. Through the examples of these two neighborhoods we respond to the following questions: what are characteristics of water-poor neighborhoods, what are the impacts of the reform, and how have residents adapted.

This examination shows that sustainable access to water is not an issue that requires normative models, but rather means to solve problems based on local environmental, socio-economic, technical, and institutional constraints (Bakker, 2010; Barrau & Frenoux, 2010). Normative models of institutional reform and private sector participation have been implemented across the continent of Africa, but have not fulfilled promises of city transformation and increased coverage rates (Gandy, 2006; Kooy & Bakker, 2008; Loftus

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& Lumsden, 2008; McDonald & Ruiters, 2005; Myers, 2011; Smith, 2006). Local responses to these changes in access have been implicit in much of this research (Budde & McGranahan, 2003; Kjellén, 2006; Kjellén & McGranahan, 2006). In response, our project seeks to understand the impact of governance reform by examining experiences of people navigating the changes in water access in two disadvantaged neighborhoods in Niamey, Niger. To move toward this understanding, we first give a background of the economic and politic context of Niamey and Niger. Secondly, we outline the history of the networked water system in Niamey and contemporary institutional reforms. This is followed by a comparison of the two neighborhoods and the ways in which residents' access water. We conclude this article by discussing the importance of water vendors in providing a flexible water service, but at a high cost. Nevertheless, water vendors provide a model of elasticity that is essential for water services in developing cities.

Urban political ecologies of water

Geographers have long been concerned with the relationship between urban areas and water. Early studies focused on the location of water in relation to growing urban areas and the development of water distribution configurations across states, particularly in the United States and Europe (see Barrows, 1923). In the 1960s, with the rise of critical and feminist traditions in the discipline, water shifted from being seen as an underlying need of human organizations to a complex system of distribution and consumption with potential political undercurrents and ramifications (see Emery & Trist, 1975; Harvey, 1973; Peet, 1977; Soja, 1968). In the 1990s, as privatization of water provision began on a massive scale around the world, geographers reacted with research focused on water as a commodity, how this commodification manifests in urban spaces, and questions on access to water, politics, and social justice (Bakker & Hemson, 2000; Gandy, 1997; Graham & Marvin, 1994; Harvey, 1996; McDonald & Ruiters, 2005; Swyngedouw, 1997). Political ecology proved to be an incredibly useful tool in understanding such relationships between water, the environment, and politics.

Broadly, political ecology research contends that “environmental change and ecological conditions are the product of political process” (Robbins, 2012: 11). If political ecology seeks to understand the “complex metabolism between nature and society” (Watts, 2000: 590), then urban political ecology focuses on manifestations of these relationships within urban spaces. Urban environments are not neutral landscapes, but rather landscapes which embody struggle, change, and power (Heynen, Kaika, & Swyngedouw, 2006). Political ecologies of water are firmly embedded in the Marxian critiques of socio-environmental processes, and thus understand water access as something politically produced (Gandy, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2004; Zug, 2013). The hydrological cycle, for the urban political ecologist, becomes the hydro-social cycle (Bakker, 2002; Linton, 2008; Linton & Budde, 2013; Swyngedouw, 2009), thus predicating any understanding of urban water access, particularly to the piped water network, as a political process. Much research on the hydro-social cycle has interrogated the participation of the private sector in water governance in developing cities (Budde & McGranahan, 2003; McDonald & Ruiters, 2005), with less attention to how water access is experienced on the ground (Kjellén, 2006; Kjellén & McGranahan, 2006; McGranahan, 2001). Increasingly, debates on futures of urban water governance focus on questions of politics of community (Bakker, 2010), the partiality of neoliberalization (Bakker, 2013; Kaika, 2003; Loftus & Lumsden, 2008), and the increasing fragmentation of urban spaces (Gandy, 2006; Graham & Marvin, 2001) rather than critiques of the state and/or market.

Poverty becomes a predictive variable for water's inaccessibility in much urban political ecology literature (Zug, 2013). Poverty, however, does not manifest the same within one city, much less across cities in different regions of the world. Poor places or neighborhoods are highly varied and complex, and more in-depth research is needed which examines the places of water inaccessibility (Bourblanc & Blanchon, 2013; Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, & Wangari, 2013). This paper offers an in-depth comparison of two neighborhoods in Niamey that share an inaccessibility to water, but are otherwise dissimilar. By highlighting how inaccessibility works on the ground and the contexts through which inaccessibility arises, we show that conditions that have led to neighborhood and household marginality are varied and complex. Examining how water is enacted and experienced through daily life in neighborhoods is critical to developing potential alternatives or sites of political action. Moulaert and Swyngedouw (2010: 233) asserts that “it is indeed precisely in these ‘marginal’ spaces—the fragments left unoccupied by the global urban order that regulates, assigns and distributes—that all matter of new urban social and cultural practices emerge; where new forms of urbanity come to life.” This paper examines some of these marginal spaces to gain insight into everyday practices of water access and ways forward in building urban futures.

Background

The French colonial government established Niamey on the banks of the Niger River in the early 1900s as a military outpost, and in 1924 the emerging city became the capital of the French colonial territory of Niger (Fuglestad, 1983). Niamey's first urban plans were quintessentially colonial, with neighborhoods for Europeans being upstream, and separated from “African” neighborhoods by a buffer zone of green space along an ephemeral drainage channel (Njoh, 2006; Sidikou, 1980; Smiley, 2010). The first networked water system in Niamey became operational in 1940 under French colonial management (Sidikou, 1980). This new drinking water system relied completely on water from the Niger River that was chemically treated and pumped through water pipes, but was only made available to the colonial European facilities and residents (Sidikou, 1980). Less than a year later, plans were already in the works to extend the piped network to more parts of the *ville européenne* (European city) and also to parts of the *nouvelle ville indigène* (new African city). The planned extension of the water network provided water from public standpipes to the African neighborhoods, not residential access points as in the European neighborhoods. Colonial planners thus built uneven access to water into the system in Niamey, and this legacy has been fundamental to Niamey's waterscape.

Niamey became the capital of the newly independent state of Niger in 1960 (Fuglestad, 1983). Along with independence came rapid urban growth, as people sought opportunity in the capital of the newly independent country (Motcho, 2010). In an effort to accommodate growth, French architects working for the urban planning ministry developed a typology of neighborhoods for Niamey's 1961 master plan, outlining building materials and population densities that would be accepted in each neighborhood (Dulucq, 1997). Neighborhoods in the former-African districts were said to be more capable of supporting growth and high population densities, while the former-European parts of Niamey were said to best accommodate low population densities because of the plan implemented by colonial officials (Dulucq, 1997). Only parts of the city deemed appropriately planned warranted investment and provision of city services such as individual water taps; residents of indigenous and unplanned neighborhoods would remain provisioned by the shared water of the public standpipe. Mud brick

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