

Chapter 15

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COVID-19 AND THE HOPE FOR DEMOCRATIC WATER OWNERSHIP IN GHANA

The response to the Covid-19 pandemic in Ghana followed a pattern seen around the world, with people's movements highly restricted. But unlike many countries, most people in Ghana are unable to access water at home, forcing them to access water from their neighbours or public standpipes. The Government was quick to provide free water for all residents, but what use is free water if people do not have running taps in their homes?

INTRODUCTION

At the onset of the pandemic in early 2020, the Government of Ghana declared a national emergency and introduced a partial lockdown of the country's major towns and cities. The response restricted the movement of all persons in affected towns except for essential service providers and for the procurement of necessities. In a country where basic survival for the majority of the poor means constant movement to earn a wage, these restrictions presented enormous challenges. Stay-at-home compliance was essentially impossible, leading to the deployment of the military and police to enforce travel restrictions.

It was in the above context that the minister of finance present-

ed the Covid-19 Response Bill to parliament to provide some reliefs for citizens. The president directed the Ghana Water Company Ltd and the Electricity Company of Ghana to ensure the stable supply of water and electricity during this period (Akufo-Addo 2020). In addition, it was declared that there was to be no disconnection of supply and that the government would absorb the cost of water bills for all Ghanaians for three months (April, May and June). All water tankers, both publicly and privately owned, were also to be mobilized to ensure the supply of water to vulnerable communities (Emmanuel 2020).

This was also in a period where several parts of the country experienced water shortages due to prolonged power outages caused by technical difficulties at the Ghana Grid Company Limited (GRID-Co) (Dapaah 2020). To address this challenge, the Ghana Water Company said it had instituted a “strategic water supply-demand management plan,” the objective of which was to bring on board “other institutions like the National Disaster Management Organisation, National Security and other agencies with water tankers to support our fleet of tankers in the delivery of water to critical areas” (Dapaah 2020).”

The new plan was designed to determine water volumes that need to be supplied in order to meet the various demands of the general public and other essential institutions during the outbreak. The GWCL also asked the public to store and preserve water.

EMPLOYEE HEALTH AND SAFETY

To ensure employee safety, the GWCL introduced a new billing system designed to reduce the frequency of visits by meter readers and frontline workers (Ibrahim 2020). The Company also advised the general public to make use of electronic and mobile payment platforms. For workers who had to visit customers, they were provided personal protective equipment including personal sanitizers and face masks. And although the Ghana Trades Union Congress has

been active at the national level addressing issues of potential worker layoffs and a call for social and economic support for workers, the main water sector union (Public Utilities Workers Union) has not been active in the discussions around water provision to date.

ACCESS TO FINANCE FOR EMERGENCY MEASURES

To finance the Covid-19 response plan, it was reported that the government borrowed US\$1.4bn to create the Coronavirus Alleviation Programme (CAP) to deal with the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic for people's health and for the different sectors of the economy, including the water sector. The government allocated an additional US\$2.6 billion (4.1% of GDP) for this program in the 2020 budget to fill gaps.

It is expected that costs for free water provision will be drawn against this amount. It is not clear at the time of writing exactly how much was provided to the water sector or has been disbursed. However, the Association of Small Town Water Producers issued a statement in August 2020 saying that they do not intend to heed the government's earlier directive to provide free water since the government had not paid for the earlier water they provided (Water Citizens' Network 2020a).

The claims of the Association were denied by the Community Water and Sanitation Agency, explaining that the government was committed to paying, and that payment would be done after verification of data by suppliers (Water Citizen's network 2020b). The Chief Executive of the Community Water and Sanitation Agency had issued an earlier statement on April 8, 2020, directing members of the Association to heed the government's directive (CWSA 2020). A check with the GWCL in August (by the author) showed that the government had paid the company for the water supplied for April to July as per the earlier directive. This is despite a statement by the Managing Director of GWCL that customers who owe water bills will not enjoy the free water policy (Nyabor 2020).

CONCLUSION

The Government of Ghana did well by providing universal access to free water for all residents for the months of April through to September 2020. Universal access is a good approach during Covid-19 as the country has not been successful in the application of targeting vulnerable populations in the past. This fact has been demonstrated significantly by the ineffectiveness of the water lifeline tariffs introduced to assist the poor but which ended up subsidizing the rich (Moselle 2017). This is because the poor in Ghana, like elsewhere, tend to live in larger groups and tend to consume more per household than wealthier families.

Though the government is providing free water to all from April to September, the problem remains that many citizens will not have access to this provision. The majority of people in urban poor communities simply have no access to piped water connections in their homes and depend on community water vendors, whom they buy from on a daily basis in buckets for household use. These people will not be given free water by the vendors. Furthermore, a lack of household access puts these people at further risk because they must leave home to buy water where they also meet other buyers, which makes the practice of physical distancing difficult. With only 42% of Ghanaians having household water connections (only 17% in rural areas), free water provision will only go so far in the prevention of Covid-19 (Ghana Living Standards Survey 2014, 91). There are also the previously disconnected who will suffer a similar fate. Additionally, there are communities which, due to existing supply challenges of the Ghana Water Company Limited, have not been experiencing sufficient water flow, and will not have water in the Covid-19 period.

The silver lining to the Covid-19 crisis for the water sector is that it has clearly demonstrated the importance of democratically controlled public water management and supply systems – a step

that would not have been possible if the government had pursued the privatization agenda they were previously being encouraged to pursue by some in the donor community. It is expected that the Covid-19 experience and lessons will aid in the full realization of the need to make water more available to people without hindrance and strengthen people's resolve to keep water public.

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