

The water crisis in African cities

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[Michel Makpenon](#) [1]

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The water issue is a major problem for people in sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, the water situation in sub-Saharan Africa remains characterised by the difficult access to this resource, the poor supply management of watering places and the high costs of water network connections. For instance, in Benin one household in three doesn't have access to drinking water, and the problem is much more acute in rural areas.

Households having access to drinking water are considered as households who have drinking water at home or within 200 metres from home: running water from the company's distribution network, fountain water, water from the village pump, water tank and water from protected wells.

Various consultations led with the populations have indeed confirmed that the water issue is a major problem for them. The concerns, as raised by the populations, focus on the difficult access to water and the poor management of the watering places, the difficulties to call for the financial participation of the population for the creation and the management of watering places and the borehole characteristics which are too often inappropriate: even if this water is neither used for drinking nor for cooking, it is nevertheless inappropriate.

Better water management is essential for urbanisation and sustainable development in African cities. According to the UN-Habitat general information document on water management, during the Second World Water Forum in the Hague, the Netherlands, in 2000, Lisa Ochola, a typical Nairobi teenager, taking part to this forum to represent the youth, told the entire world that her family had no running water, sometimes for months. She said that during such periods, she manages to maintain her personal hygiene with a glass of water. In order to make the water problem better understood, she added that a bottle of water bought at the supermarket is more expensive than gasoline. John Njoroge, a Nairobi inhabitant living in the Lavington district, has also to deal with this problem: he must spend 10,000 KSh (Kenyan shillings) per month, that is to say about US\$128, to meet the water needs of a family of five persons. Kibera, another part of the town and one of the largest slums in Africa, is confronted to the 'flying toilets' phenomenon: people get rid of their excrement by putting them in plastic bags and throwing them into the air anywhere.

The water and sanitation crisis in Nairobi has worsened in 2000 when an important drought compelled the authorities to cut down water and electricity. As in most African cities, problems do not stem from the scarcity of water as such, but to the fact that 50 per cent of this water is wasted or diverted.

The water crisis in cities is increasingly the subject of special attention in all international fora on water. The alarm was raised in Dublin and Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and continued to resound in other meetings such as Beijing and Istanbul in 1996, in Cape Town in 1997 and at the Second Global

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Forum on Water held in the Hague in 2000. In most of these meetings, the water crisis in African cities has been one of the main concerns.

Globally, Africa is urbanising at a rate of about 5 per cent, the fastest rate in the world. The urban population in Africa could rise from 138 million in 1990 to 500 million in 2020, and African cities with over 1 million inhabitants will then have to accommodate nearly 200 million people. Regarding water, a survey conducted in 1990 in 29 sub-Saharan countries showed that eight of these countries suffered from a shortage or a scarcity of water. According to estimates, in 2025, that number should increase to 20 out of 29.

For instance, Lagos, the commercial centre of Nigeria, the African country with the largest population, has nearly 14 million inhabitants, that is to say half the population of Kenya and more than most African countries. It is the most populated city in Africa – Lagos is the sixth-largest city in the world and could become the third-largest in two decades. This would require greater access to water supply and to other infrastructures as well as essential services for millions of additional inhabitants. Moreover, as in many other African countries, Lagos is about to face a real water crisis.

If we do not want future generations to suffer the consequences of our mistakes, as Lisa Ochola did, we must listen to the opinion of Professor Kader Asmal, winner of the Stockholm Water Award: 'We cannot enter the 21st century with the usual commercial approach we are used to having concerning water management in big cities. We must make a realistic assessment of our water management capabilities in specific circumstances. We must dare. We must show unfailing commitment to equity. We need political determination. It is important that research and education play their role and lead the way that will best achieve fairness and efficiency in the long term. Finally we need national and international collaboration and understanding because sustainable water management represents long term security for all of us.'

METHODS OF SUPPLY

Access to clean water in Africa does not correspond to that of Europe.

In fact, a small proportion of the population has access to drinking water and the water service is not restricted to the conventional networks, as there are still other drinking-water sources available such as communal water points (springs), wells and boreholes.

Water from the natural environment (oceans, lakes, rivers, creeks, groundwater, rains) is a collective good. It belongs altogether to no one and to everyone. Considered as a natural resource, water has multiple utilisations: agriculture (70 per cent), industry (20 per cent) and domestic consumption (10 per cent).

Water management is complex. It is a cross-cutting resource because it affects altogether health, urban development, agriculture, industry and leisure. It also has multiple stakeholders and has to be approached on a territorial basis too.

Management of water services is rather complicated. It requires high technical ability, permanent adaptation to changing conditions and important funds, because of the high cost of infrastructure and equipments, together with permanent maintenance needs.

Although water management has often been transferred to local authorities in Africa, resources themselves were not transferred. Water companies are still in charge of water management in African cities, but without adequate consultation with local authorities.

In the case of Cotonou, access to drinking water seems secured, but some neighbourhoods still remain without water supply.

http://www.pambazuka.org/images/articles/533/cotonou_access_to_water.jpg [2]

The results of the above table show that 98.9 per cent of people have access to drinking water. Nevertheless, only 43.6 per cent have running water at home and 54.5 per cent of them will buy

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running water from nearby homes. The water from the Société nationale des eaux du Bénin (SONEB) and elsewhere – which comes from fountains, district pumps, tanks or protected wells – is considered as running water at home.

Proper fountains or fitted-out watering places almost do not exist anymore in the city of Cotonou. But households which have no connections at home stock up buckets of water bought in a nearby house.

Cotonou populations often face water cuts, which sometimes last all day. The company in charge of water distribution explains that this problem is due to the maintenance of the network and to power cuts. But the investigations that we made showed that 20 years ago a German firm called GIGGS had forbidden the urbanisation of the area around the pumping stations because it might damage the groundwater. But the advice given by the firm was not followed and the area was largely urbanised, causing damage to the groundwater and thus to the water supply company. This led the distribution company to increase the price of drinking water. Leaders of the company usually explain that these adjustments are due to the international financial crisis and to the high maintenance costs.

In accordance with article 93 of the law 97-029, dated 15 January 1999 and concerning the organisation of cities in the Republic of Benin, the town is responsible for the supply and the distribution of drinking water. But this has never been respected whereas it might have encouraged competition and enabled populations to have a say.

CHALLENGES

For a good water management policy in African cities, several challenges have to be met, such as:

- the implementation of laws and regulations giving water management to local communities
- the knowledge of water sources
- the development of a framework for the management of surface water resources
- the necessity of financial means and human resources to monitor and operate the equipments
- informing and educating people for a rational use of watering places.

PROPOSALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve people's access to drinking water, African cities need support in the following areas:

- the control, the development and the water supply based on the principle of demand
- the management and the rational exploitation of water resources
- the training and re-training of communities as well as the establishment of a process concerning equipments renewal
- the strengthening of the drinking water supply systems
- the establishment of a high council for water
- the setting-up of a water fund for a real management of the resource
- the establishment of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

If these proposals were followed, African cities could expect a significant percentage of its population with access to safe drinking water by 2020.

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* Translated from French by Carol Birene.

* This article is part of a special issue on water and water privatisation in Africa produced as a joint initiative of the [Transnational Institute](#) [3], [Ritimo](#) [4] and [Pambazuka News](#) [5]. This special issue is being published in [English](#) [6] and in [French](#) [7].

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Article-Summary:

Access to running water remains in a state of crisis for a huge number of people across Africa, writes Michel Makpenon. With growing urbanisation across the continent, African cities will need the political determination to ensure sustainable water resources based on social need rather than commercial concerns, he stresses.

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