

Ghana: Grass roots sensitization and civic education: A case study of the “water for all” campaign

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Introduction

This paper looks at the policy framework of water privatization in Ghana, the main actors, the key strategies of engagement and the potential for grassroots mobilization for participation in the decision making process. It is my conviction -- and I am sure it is so for most of you -- that reform in the water sector must be aimed at achieving FULL protection of the rights of all to potable water. The ultimate objective should be to achieve universal access. This means that water must be identified primarily as a public good and a human right and not simply as a commodity to be traded in the open market. In determining the mechanisms of access, reforms must also take into consideration the gender inequities and the power relations at the family, community, and state levels.

The Policy Framework

The government of Ghana does not appear to have any coherent water sector policy of its own. Basically, it has relied on the World Bank for policy direction. Two important World Bank-backed policies have been key to setting the stage for the privatization of water in Ghana: decentralization and separation.

Fiscal & budgetary decentralization

In 1988, the Government of Ghana began to implement this policy in order to devolve certain fiscal, administrative and development responsibilities from the central government to the district assemblies. Most rural districts have since indicated severe distress, largely due to difficulties in raising sufficient revenue to address poverty in these areas. The expectation that these rural communities will provide substantial back-up funds for decentralized water projects has proved unrealistic. While decentralization can increase participation, accountability and transparency, World Bank-prescribed decentralization, at least in the case of Ghana, is driven primarily by fiscal concerns – that is, the desire to reduce central government expenditures and increase the revenue generation responsibilities at the district level. The fundamental concern of the World Bank is to reduce the government’s deficits and improve the government’s ability to pay back its loans. It has little, if anything at all, to do with improving grassroots democracy and reducing poverty. The decentralization process, therefore, set the stage not only for devolving to the districts the responsibility for the provision of drinking water and sanitation services, but also shifted some of the responsibility for the government’s international debt burden repayment to the impoverished rural and semi rural areas.

Separation of rural and urban water services

In the 1993/4 fiscal years, the Government began to implement a World Bank-backed policy to segregate the potentially profitable urban water supply systems from the unprofitable rural water systems. The same policy also shifted responsibility for sanitation and wastewater management to the impoverished local governments.

The World Bank prescribed the policy of separation or segregation [unbundling] in order to create a segment of the water sector that would be attractive to, and profitable for, foreign private investors. This process is sometimes called “cherry picking” or “cream skimming.” Prior

to the segregation policy, there existed an integrated water and sewerage system, which ensured that drinking water and sanitation were managed together. It also facilitated cross subsidies. The relatively better resourced metropolitan and urban communities together with industry paid a small levy to support government delivery of water to the relatively poorer rural communities. The segregation policy has destroyed all that. The result is that less endowed local governments are unable to meet the water and sanitation needs of their people.

It is worth noting that the INFORMATION MEMORANDUM prepared for donors by STONE & WEBSTER stipulates that the prospective investors will not be responsible for providing water to low-income communities in the urban areas. This remains the responsibility of the Government of Ghana. The privatization scheme is tailored to meet the objectives of the multi-national corporations such as Suez Lyonnaise, Saur and Biwater who want profits without risks. Flipping through the memorandum it becomes obvious that the urban poor are not likely to benefit from the expansion of water supply in the urban area under privatization. Also, the segregation of rural water from urban water ensures that the majority of the people who live in the rural areas will not benefit from the expected "efficiency miracles" envisaged under privatization. This has been made even more unlikely as a result of the imposition by the IMF of an automatic water rate adjustment mechanism on the State regulator, the Public Utilities Regulatory Commission (PURC), that ensures that water rates adjust automatically as the local currency appreciates or depreciates against the US dollar. For quite obvious reasons the rates have only been adjusting upwards since the process began. Therefore, it is unlikely that the profit motives of the private operators, literally protected by IMF/WB conditionality and anchored by the principles of full cost recovery, will be consistent with the policy objectives of the Government to supply the poor.

The emergence of National Coalition Against Privatization (CAP) of Water

In reaction to the above, a national campaign defending the right to safe, affordable water and a broad-based dialogue on alternative water management options became an urgent priority. In May 2001 ISODEC organized a National Forum on water sector reforms in Ghana and conducted two days of strategizing that involved a broad cross section of civil society in Ghana. Out of this forum was born the National Coalition Against Privatization (CAP) of Water based on resolutions that participants were able to adopt together. These were then presented in a document titled the Accra Declaration and addressed to the President, the Parliament, the press and the general public.

The Accra Declaration spelled out the principles and objectives for which the CAP would stand which included (1) conducting a broad-based campaign to ensure that all Ghanaians have access to safe and affordable potable water; (2) ensuring that ownership, control and management of water services remain in public/community hands; (3) promoting public awareness about the privatization process; and (4) developing and promoting alternative solutions to the problems militating against universal access to water including problems of public management and efficiency.

The Coalition has since been functioning quite vigorously and has accomplished incredible success in reaching communities throughout Ghana within a short time. The coalition has not only succeeded in compelling the suspension of the signing of the privatization deal but has also compelled the revision of the contract documents to include public/community options, the Bank to improve its disclosure policy in Ghana and the creation of a unit at the Ministry of works and housing to look at the critical issue of access for the poor.

How we did it-the Engagement Strategy

Public Awareness

- Making educational videos for mass viewing
- T-shirts, car stickers, banners etc
- Develop educational materials with basic information about proposed privatization
- Prepare concise, key campaign messages for leafleting

Educational Materials for Lobbying and Policy Debate

- Concise, tight critique of privatization
- Concise presentation of alternative models, i.e. community/public partnerships
- Good research on social impacts of water privatization in other countries
- Analysis of what went wrong with Ghana Water and Sewerage Corporation] GWSC]

Community mobilization

Once the information was put in the public domain and citizens began to relate and to react to the issues, the next step was mobilizing the communities to demand safe and affordable water as a matter of right. This naturally placed them against privatization, which implies full cost recovery and high water rates. The direct result of this strategy has been the emergence of Local Action Committees [**LACs**] as centers of mobilization at the grassroots level.

Linking with organized labour

What is new in Ghanaian civil society engagement culture is the link that emerged between community activists operating within **the local action committees** and organized labour. This created the critical mass needed to engage other stakeholders. Another important link has been the link with the faith -based organizations particularly the Christian Council of Ghana who stated their opposition water privatization and the Catholic bishops conference who issued a cautions statement in support of water for all. This created the needed climate for us to reaching out to many more people.

Media Campaign

Articles for newspapers, Radio shows, Television shows

Lobbying Government and World Bank

The main thrust of this strategy has been to argue for greater transparency and public participation thus challenging the WB to own declaration to full information disclosure, transparency and participation. We therefore insist that documents such as the Transaction Advisor's report are put in the public domain.

We try to explain to the WB officials why in a poor country it is inappropriate water privatization as conditionality for granting loans.

We constantly maintain contacts with government through the Water Sector Restructuring Secretariat of the Ministry of Works and Housing to ensure that there is always a corridor left open for dialogue.

Promoting International Solidarity

Together with our partners, collaborators and sympathizers we design and distribute Sign-on letters to key persons in government, the WB, IMF and the UN bodies demanding an end to the involvement of MNCs in Ghana water and the freeing of our government from privatization

conditionalities. To facilitate this we built international networks of communication through e-mails and tele-conferencing and attend international conferences and meetings.

Credible Research

- Social Impact Assessments of water privatization in other countries
- Research in countries where WB claims privatization has been a success
- Surveys identifying basic obstacles to access to safe, potable water
- Research documenting public health, gender and other impacts of decreased access to safe water
- Researching alternative models to water privatization.

Difficulties/Challenges

- Misrepresentation and mis-information of our intentions
- Difficulties of translating key policy documents into local languages for mass dissemination
- Difficulty of obtaining information from both government and the bank
- The reluctance of some CSOs to state their views publicly thus leading to confusion in the minds of their constituents.
- Funding constraints

Conclusions

- ❖ A vibrant civil society is essential for the survival of democracy and for the protection and promotion of **Rights**. There is the need for constant networking among civil society in pursuit of human rights and the general well being of the citizenry.
- ❖ There should always be enough space to facilitate dialogue among stakeholders
- ❖ Consensus building should always be pursued
- ❖ There is the need for global solidarity on the commonalities
- ❖ Always be transparent, accountable and honest with your constituency.
- ❖ Listen to the voices from the grassroots particularly when it comes to the alternatives.