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The Ugandan strategy for serving the urban poor

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The Ugandan strategy for serving the urban poor

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PROVISION OF WATER services in urban settings is an enormous challenge to all governments and utility providers. In a situation where utilities are struggling to cope with provision of services on a commercially viable basis, infrastructural development has tended to take place in relatively economically well-to-do areas. The obvious reason being better returns and yet all individuals, including the urban poor, have a right to safe drinking water. Service to the poor has tended to lag behind. Efforts made to serve the poor have always been through installation of kiosks but even then, sustainability and cost to the beneficiaries has been unfavourable. The kiosks end up being disconnected because of non-payments, the service provider loses revenue and the urban poor lose out on the service. This paper highlights efforts made by the National Water and Sewerage Corporation of Uganda in the last 2 years to improve and ensure sustainability of water supply to the urban poor in Jinja and Uganda in general.

Jinja town was the leading industrial town of Uganda until 1979 and remains the second largest town. It lies on the east bank of river Nile on the shore of Lake Victoria from which it takes its water supply and into which it discharges its effluent. It's linked to Njeru, an upcoming urban area on the opposite bank of river Nile by the Owen Falls dam, which produces the country's electricity. These two towns form the Jinja Water and Sewerage service area (JWSSA) with estimated population of 250,000.

Due to the historical turmoil, which befell Uganda for decades, there was general economic decline leading to collapse of the existing infrastructure and other essential services. The problem was aggravated by persistent population migration to the urban centers with no Government planned programmes to sustain this influx and Jinja/Njeru towns were no exception to this unfortunate quagmire. By 1986, less than half of the targeted population was served with piped water.

With changes in the social political environment and in this era of re-awakening - government, through the National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC here in referred to as the Corporation), which was mandated to provide water and sewerage services in Jinja, had to carry out rehabilitation and expansion.

With the above scenario in mind and the Corporation's struggles to cope with provision of services on a commercially viable basis, there has been a tendency for infrastructural development to take place in relatively well-to-do areas for the obvious reason of better returns. Yet Article 25.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948 and Article II of the Charter of the Organization of African Unity, 1963 declare that all individuals have a right to safe drinking water, hence NWSC has a duty to provide services to everyone, even the urban poor.

In the past, the efforts made to serve the poor have always been through provision of kiosks but even then, sustainability and cost to the beneficiary has been unfavorable. Over the last 2 years, in line with government programmes the Corporation has had to focus and re-orient its operation to ensure expansion and sustainability of services to the poor in a cost effective manner.

The urban poor

For a practical approach to the problem, it was imperative to first qualify, quantify and locate the urban poor. Poverty can be defined as the state of existing on amounts that are too small, and living below the minimum accepted level of income needed to buy the basic necessities of life. This definition is rather simplistic since one can argue that this state has a high degree of relativity making it hard to have a universal baseline. Putting all controversies associated with the definition aside, criteria for qualification of the poor in Jinja was based partially but not entirely on the following: Household monthly income levels of less than 80,000/= Ug.Shs per month (1USD = 2000 UgShs) and in most cases earned on a day-to-day basis, clustered settlements with a high crowding Index (0.25 – 14 people) with no or low service levels of water consumption of less than 20 litres per capita per day.

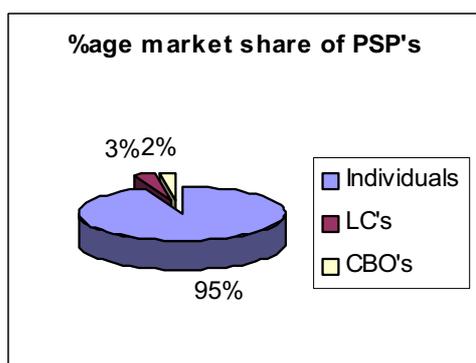
The urban poor were then linked/associated to geographical locations, as people tend to settle in areas commensurate with their income. Distinct settlements identified were colonial, informal settlements (slums), the peri-urban poor and pockets of the poor amid the affluent.

The shortcomings within the existing operational methodology and framework were critically reviewed and the shortcomings and loopholes were turned into challenges for which practical strategies have been put in place. The strategies were divided into two, firstly soft ware, which needed mainly policy, managerial, administrative and operational reforms without necessarily requiring substantial financial resources and thus easier to implement. Hard-ware strategies were also identified and these were mainly in the form of infrastructural development like mains extensions. From the social-economic survey, a total of 48,000 people were estimated to have no or inadequate access to piped water.

Challenges associated with serving the urban poor

NWSC has faced a number of challenges in satisfying consumer demands for the urban poor. The challenges include but not limited to the following:

- Many of these settlements are unplanned, lack basic facilities and poor infrastructure, are commonly found in the low lying areas, the wetlands which according to the NEMA statute, human habitation is not expected in those areas.
- Some kiosks had been tried out in these settlements by installation of Kiosks and handing them over to Operators. The operators were mainly in forms of Private individuals, Village local councils and women groups. These operators were in charge of operating, maintenance and managing the kiosk on daily basis to sell water to the community at a reasonable profit and at the end of the month pay the water bill raised by NWSC. By February 2001, out of 340 that were available in Jinja, 230 were disconnected for none payment. In Kampala, out of the 1300 kiosks, 500 were disconnected while the remaining 800 also owed NWSC about 450 million in arrears and if the disconnection policy was to be strictly followed, almost all Kiosks would be off supply for non-payment. The reason being the middle-men who collected money from kiosks were not remitting it. While the poor were in effect paying promptly as they draw water from the water out-lets, they would suffer from actions of the third party and get denied supply (disconnected), something against principles of natural justice.



- The policy of NWSC with regard to affordability for the poor is such that the poor are expected to pay about 12/= for a 20-litre jerry can and the commercial consumers that are connected to sewer-age are paying Ushs.48/= for the same amount of water (Ushs.24/= for water and Ushs.24 for sewerage). In practice the poor were paying between Ushs.50--100/= depending on location. The policy of the low tariff regime meant for the poor had in effect benefited middlemen (Kiosk operators).
- Poor hygiene practices in the poor communities. Studies had shown that they depend on 8litres per capita per

day. This is inadequate for basic hygiene bathing, cooking, washing e.t.c.

- With availability of alternative sources of water, though of doubtful quality and often at no cost, a factor compounded by low awareness of the health risk, residents resort to spring/lake water, which to them is pure with no added chemicals like tap water. More that 90% of the springs are con-taminated with -Coli, an organism that originates from the human intestines, an indication that communities that depend on these sources are prone and vulnerable to water borne dis-eases. Indeed the two cholera epi-demics of 1997 and 1999 hit these set-tlements most. The near to zero turbid-ity of spring water creates a false impression that the water is simply too clean.
- There was inadequate network intensification in gazetted service area .The Corporation has not been in position to cope with the provision of services in areas inhabited by the poor due to enormous investment costs and expected low revenue returns. The other problem has been the apparent high rate of default made these investments in these settlements risky and unattractive. The problem is aggravated by uncontrolled development, congestion, the poor nature of the dwellings and absentee landlords. All these factors do not favour serious infrastructural investment.
- A good number of the urban poor with their own houses who would otherwise be served through individual connections could not afford the cost of a private connection (Connection fees of 150, 000/= plus materials and fitting).

Operationalization of strategies

There was a need to address the factor of inadequate water use, improve accessibility and reliability of supply, work towards rationalizing price to the end user and ensure sustainability of urban poor water supply services.

Software strategies

The Corporation has put in place, a mechanism for the timely monitoring of remittance of revenues from kiosk operators and yard tap owners. Incomes in such communities are erratic, so it was necessary for the Corporation to critically reconsider and implement reforms in the billing procedures and collect revenue weekly rather than on a monthly basis. Experience has shown that this system works, however it calls for logistical support, which may call upon further financial, and human resources. To mitigate the substantial inputs required for effective monitoring, the Corporation has gone into partnership with the operators to ensure prompt payments. A series of sensitization workshops have been held, in which, among other things the operators were taught to read meters and can now assess for themselves what to remit on weekly basis. As a result of this partnership, they feel more attached, recognised and proud of service they are rendering. Token Prizes have been given out to outstanding perform-

ers and this in itself has stimulated some element of positive competition among the operators.

To back up monitoring, accounts for the urban poor for both kiosks and yard posts have been identified and a bulk owner number in the CUSTIMA billing system created. This allows for monitoring of performance in terms of payments and arrears management, water consumption and hence growth of service to the poor and building of a database vital for prudent management decisions and for other planning purposes.

The Corporation, taking a leaf from earlier projects has reduced fees to only 50,000/= and softened terms for new connections to attract more yard posts and thus encouraged more individual connections which are easier to manage. This works well in the peri-urban areas where most of the residents are on their ancestral land, can easily be identified and tracked to take full responsibility to meet this obligation. Whereas in the informal settlements where there is a high turnover of residence and less commitment to participation in the socio-economic infrastructural development this is very difficult.

The problem of the high number of disconnected accounts was looked at and it was clear that by just re-activating these accounts and putting in place a proper management and monitoring mechanism, 30% of the poor people without water would be served. This would also lessen walking distance to the existing kiosks, improve on water consumption and ultimately enhance public health and productivity; forming a basis for installing additional kiosks.

The Corporation is investigating the practicability and viability of installing pre-pay smart technology on kiosks to permit NWSC to directly deal with consumers irrespective of the occupation status. A pilot project is to be implemented on a small scale in Kampala the capital city of Uganda. The experiences garnered in the pilot project will determine the fate of this technology. The outright advantage of such technology is that such installations can easily be transferred to other areas of need where kiosk users in an area graduate to yard taps.

Indicators have been agreed upon for monitoring purposes some of which are: Maximum walking distance to point source, Total number of households serviced per kiosk, and Average population serviced per kiosk. The major challenge so far is the capacity to realistically measure and determine these indicators on ground.

Hardware strategies

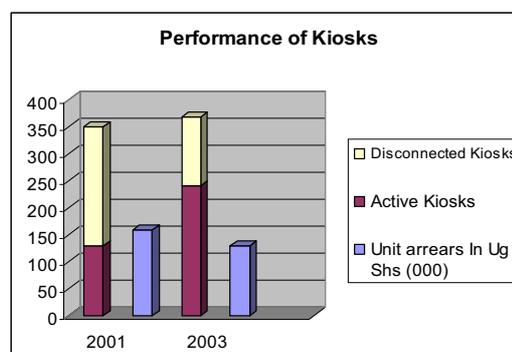
There is now a deliberate policy and commitment from top management to work towards bridging the supply inequity and extending supply to the unserved poor communities in the most humane, socially acceptable and cost effective manner which will allow growth and sustainability of service. A total of 30 km of pipeline and connection of 1200 subsidized yard taps has been implemented in Jinja. To reduce investment costs, the corporation has been encouraging community participation; contributions, mainly in

form of subsidized labour for the excavation of mains have been encouraging. There is now an increased tendency to use HDPE and PVC pipes, which are relatively cheap, compared to the traditional and historical use of GI pipes. The Corporation is moving away from construction of kiosks with expensive super-structures but to rather simpler ones and what's more is encouraging and facilitating more compound yard posts which can be shared by a few homes under their agreed arrangements.

Further interventions are required in terms infrastructural development. A total of 1300 yard taps and 60 kiosks will be needed to ensure access to water supply for a further estimated 32,000 residents.

Achievements

It has been possible to generate a data bank for the poor, thus enabling focused service. With this information, monitoring of performance and planning for service expansion is possible.



A total of 94 kiosks, which had been disconnected in Jinja town, have been reactivated in the system and this action alone has enabled over 15,000 people to access water, this has generally improved public health.

The percentage of water billed for this category of consumers has doubled from 3% to the current 6% with average per capita consumption of 20 lpd.

The Corporation has been able move further towards meeting one of its goals of supplying water in a commercially and socially acceptable manner to a wider population.

Mobilization of financial resources

National water been able to hold dialogue with government and other stakeholders to appreciate that water to the urban poor has poor returns on investment and can not be treated like a commercial venture but instead a social mission. This has resulted in positive gains on a national scale as follows:

Local Government

The Kampala City Council (KCC) has mobilized over Ushs.200 million under the LG Development Program (LGDP) for waster supply improvements in the five divi-

sions in Kampala. This amount has already been passed on to NWSC, water supply extensions will be effected in those areas that were jointly identified by the KCC and local councils.

Central Government

The Central Government has set aside U Shs 400 million this financial year to support implementation of water supply and sanitation improvements in informal settlements mainly in Kampala: National Water & Sewerage Corporation. This financial year NWSC has set aside U Shs 700 million for water supply extensions in peri-urban areas. The bulk of this amount would go into water supply improvements in those areas.

Donors

- KfW has confirmed a grant of 5 million Euro (8.5 billion Uganda Shillings) to support Water Supply for the urban poor. Project preparation is underway.
- The French Government through the Kampala City Council has confirmed support to Kampala City Council with 3.8 million Euros to support water supply and sanitation improvements in 38 parishes.
- The Water and Sanitation Program (World Bank) has financed the management study to the tune of US \$ 50,000.

From the above experience, the importance of management, mobilization and monitoring are crucial aspects in the provision of water services to the poor. As service providers fund expansion of the network, it's imperative that the above aspects are integrated to ensure sustainability of service.

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