



Privatisation: a burden or strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa? Focusing on access to water in Wovia Village, Cameroon.

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Summary:

This article outlines the weaknesses of privatisation in Sub-Saharan Africa in face of continuous poverty and social underdevelopment. It argues that privatisation worsens poverty by focusing on financial sustainability of energy services like water and electricity rather on social services. It then draws realities from Wovia village in the West Coast of Limbe Cameroon to reiterate the fact that despite privatisation in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, many more people especially rural people in this region are still cut off from MDGs like access to safe drinking water thereby affecting the impacts of other MDGs like improving sanitation and education in the region. It is based on research literature by UNDP (2006), IPC (2006), IEA (2002-2004), OECD (2004), World Bank (2004) and independent field work by the African Centre for Community and Development (2004-2006).

The end of colonisation in Sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1960s saw the emergence of strong populist governments with the role of providing social services like water, electricity, health care, education, roads etc to the peoples of this region. However as most of these governments were dependent on foreign direct investments for their economic and social interventions, the provision of these services were bound to be affected by the debt crises of the 1980s in which donors increasingly lobbied and pressured these governments for budgetary contraptions, restructuring of public services which finally gave way to full privatization in the 1990s of major sectors like water and electricity.

Privatisation of basic utilities in Sub-Saharan Africa was based on the following arguments that:

- It will lead to competition and regulation in services provision hence efficiency from stakeholders vying to provide basic utilities in Sub Saharan Africa.
- It also worked on the assumption that since most private providers bidding for providing these services where apparently successful institutions, they will translate their expertise in the discharge of these services and hence repay the financial and lending institutions money that was otherwise not forthcoming from indebted Sub-Saharan governments and also better the lives of the people.
- Privatisation will help fiscal austerity policies of institutions like the World Bank in mainstreaming Sub-Saharan Africa into the Global Economy and development.

- It assumed that Sub-Saharan under-development was a product of prioritising on social service provisions by weak governments rather than financial sustainability which was considered a tool to stimulate domestic growth in these countries.

The strategies for privatisation led to the following austerity measures from important stakeholders like the World Bank and her affiliates like International Finance Corporation and Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency:

- Firstly, World Bank lending for the provision of public electricity utilities fell from US\$2.9 billion in 1990 to US\$824 million in 2001.
- Moreover her sector lending targeting private investors in the region plummeted from US\$45 million to US\$687 million.
- More so, with fiscal austerity programmes imposed on local governments it became evident that their focus will be diverted towards creating better infrastructural frameworks for financial cooperation with donor institutions and countries rather than engaging on social services provision hence shrinking even further access to basic utilities in countries already identified as having marginal provision of these services.

However the high expectations of privatisation of basic utilities have not matched the results in this region. While some few cases of improvements in service provisions have been registered, the majority of countries in this region have remained where they were or simply surged backwards. This is coupled with serious lapses in the attainment of Millennium Development Goals in the areas of the provision of safe drinking water and electricity affecting incidentally other areas like education and sanitation. The following statistics justify this assertion.

In 2004 Sub-Saharan Africa was 23% points lower than country average in the area of access to improved water source. This constituted just 56% of the population of the region (IEA 2002-2004).

Access to electricity rose at snail pace from 9% to 24% in 32 years. Strangely despite privatisation in 2002 over half of a billion people in Sub-Saharan Africa still lacked access to electricity of which 80% lived in rural areas (IEA 2002).

As a result of the persistent scarcity of basic utilities in Sub-Saharan Africa the World Bank and OECD in 2004 respectively reviewed the policy of privatization in the region

by highlighting the need to include parameters like infrastructural privatization, case specific approaches, good governance, promoting competition and regulation without a corresponding focus on building the capacities of Public Sectors who ironically still constituted the most dedicated and extensive providers of basic utilities in the region. While the acceptance of the weakness in privatization policies in the region by these institutions is suggestive of a shift, the shift is not expected to be dramatic for organizational cultures might sometimes conflict with regional or environmental dynamics. Indeed privatization like any modern instrument to better the lives of people or reduce poverty may only work contemporarily if it is poor in focus (Hall and Midgley, 2004) thereby justifying the need for process approaches as tools of learning especially in the sector of providing basic utilities in poor rural and urban populations usually affected by power relations, vulnerabilities, class divides, gender discrepancies, political arenas etc (Toner and Cleaver, 2005) impacting even more negatively on access to basic utilities like water to the most vulnerable segments like women, children and the very poor. The rationale however for such a shift is grounded on the following disadvantages of privatization as a policy in the region.

- It focussed on financial sustainability rather than social development which many governments were keen on before the approach hence embedding poverty especially as governments had to prioritize on creating favourable conditions for privatization or private investments rather than on social policy delivery (OECD, 2004).
- As a result poor households suffered from stringent measures like disconnections for failing to meet up with the high tariffs imposed by private stakeholders. Disconnections led to a 12% fall in connections in Dakar, Senegal while according to the Human Development Report of 2006 the poor are said to pay higher for electricity and water because they depend on secondary and tertiary suppliers noted to increase the costs of these basic utilities (Bayliss and Fine, 2007).
- More so before privatization prices for basic utilities were set below cost while rural areas like Ghana (Bayliss and Fine, 2007) benefited from cross subsidies as urban areas with high tariffs were used to provide utilities and infrastructure to

poor rural areas. The priority on high tariff areas coupled with including operational and new investment costs on tariffs in Sub-Saharan Africa has also been given as suggestion that financial sustainability and was the focus of privatization rather than social services hence the embedding of poverty and difficulties in attainment of MDGs.

Case Study: Wovia Village

Wovia is situated about 1 kilometre from Isokolo Check Point, in the West Coast of Limbe, Fako Division, and South West Province of Cameroon. Cameroon recently privatized many state owned services like electricity (for 20 years to AES) (Bayliss and McKinley, 2007; Bayliss and Fine, 2007), her Agro-industrial sector including the Tea Estates in Tole and Ndu from the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), Post and Telecommunication etc. it is also a rural area by geography in Sub-Saharan Africa when fishing, drying of fish and the selling of illegal fuel from Nigeria and “hot drinks” as its main economic activities. It is inhabited by the Isubu or Isuwu people who are also found in Botoland a few kilometres away and shares land boundaries and the Atlantic Coastline with Isokolo village.

Needs Identified

- To begin with, there is a lack of pipe –borne water in the whole of Wovia village despite its intrinsic closeness to Limbe the third largest urban council in the country and home to the National Oil Refinery (SONARA).
- There is a lack of toilet facilities in Wovia, leading to the use of the Atlantic Coastline for the dumping of human and other wastes thereby affecting negatively human and other ecosystems and with possibilities of spreading diseases like cholera etc.
- There is also a scarcity of drinking water as households depend on a distant ground spring that merges with the sea during high tides. This has in turn led to women, children and old people covering long distances to carry water for cooking and cleaning of their houses or to bathe in public at the shoreline etc and incapacity to carry drinking water during high tides due to dirt and saltiness caused by sea water infiltrating the ground spring.

- More so, as women and children make several trips to the spring in a day in order to satisfy their domestic needs, they incur more burden especially as they are expected to go school or for women, cook or smoke fish to sell for their families in the various local markets.

How where these needs identified?

Through semi structured and structured interviews and questionnaires of Wovia women and children using distant ground spring and Atlantic Coastline for various uses including bathing, washing of clothes, as toilets, for dumping of other wastes like plastics, old clothes etc, pupils of government primary school, Wovia who use the spring and sea as toilets, for swimming as well as local fishermen etc. These interviews were conducted in 2004-2006.

Some Findings

All 50 pupils of Government Primary School Wovia interviewed at the shoreline or at the mouth of the spring testified that they had drunk from the spring, dumped an object into the sea including papers or plastics and that they had seen somebody use the sea as a toilet facility.

85% of women interviewed confirmed that they thought the distant they covered to carry water was far and will prefer pipe-borne water. This number tallied with 83% of children including girls who also thought the distance was far and will prefer pipe –borne water. 50% of adult women did not link their activities around the water-holes to any diseases while the same number thought they could be linked.

All households contacted in Wovia had at least 1 person who used the sea for at least one of the following activities; bathing, swimming, fishing, washing of clothes, dumping etc. The number of women who participated in these studies either through questionnaires or interviews was 50 just like the number of children who participated. They were selected randomly. Studies were also conducted during market and school days when the interviewees had more than one important activity to perform.

Proposals

- Wovia is in need of a water project to channel pipe-borne water to poor households for cooking and other domestic chores as well to reduce exposure to water-borne

diseases like cholera and also to reduce the trips that women and children make to fetch water for domestic needs.

- More so, Wovia is in dire need of sensitization campaigns that can discourage the use of the Atlantic Coastline for biological waste or encourage or ensure the construction of modern toilets as pit toilets may be too close to the ground spring sustaining the village now or to promote environmental awareness by discouraging dumping of plastics into the sea etc
- Also, Wovia needs to diversify its coastline into touristic attractions like boating services or restaurants to incidentally affect unsustainable use of her water-holes, create employment and increase the standard of living there. This proposal will only work if people are provided with pipe borne water and do not need the coast line for the present uses.
- Wovia needs synergies with local government and national government, civil society organisations and international development stakeholders to invest in the provision of basic services in order to reduce vulnerabilities there.

Conclusion

Wovia like most parts of Sub-Saharan Africa is still dependent on national governments (Hall and Midgley, 2004) to better her livelihoods outcomes in terms of provision and enhancing access to basic utilities like electricity, water, and MDGs like sanitation and education.

More over strengthening the capacities of the Public sector to provide basic utilities is more proactive for development in Wovia and Cameroon which by extrapolation can be for Sub-Saharan Africa.

This will however only work if there is a dramatic or monumental increase in both Overseas Development Assistance in the Public Sector for investments in the provision of basic utilities and also a concerted effort by local governments in identifying and mainstreaming local resources towards this goal. This calls for local and international strategic partnerships between donors, beneficiaries, governments and civil society organisations towards the establishment of sustainable partnerships for development contemporaneous to modern social policy delivery (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002). To privatize or focus on financial sustainability no matter its merits without a focus on the

poor themselves or prioritizing public sector capacity building will tantamount to the continuous failure of privatization and the embedding of poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa (Bayliss and McKinley, 2007; Bayliss and Fine, 2007).

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