

Chapter 17

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NIGERIA'S INFORMAL WATER PROVIDERS: FILLING IN THE PUBLIC GAPS

Access to water in Nigeria remains a challenge for many, despite considerable natural water resources and a well-defined bureaucratic water infrastructure. These gaps in the public water system have been amplified by Covid-19, with informal water operators providing desperately needed water services, particularly in rural areas. This chapter highlights how the informal water sector in Nigeria has made a difference during Covid-19, especially for the poor, who have no other option. It can be argued that informal operators have bailed the Nigerian government out of an imminent water scarcity disaster, providing further evidence of the need to rebuild Nigeria's public water infrastructure.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is endowed with immense freshwater resources (Wutich et al 2016, Muhammad and Dansabo 2018). Indeed, it is so rich that many of its 36 states derive their names from rivers, which are important sources of livelihood and wealth creation for many families. Nigeria also has a well-established institutional infrastructure, along with administrative resources, to facilitate water supply to all Nigerians.

Despite this, Nigeria has failed to harness its water resources and has mismanaged costly investments (Nwankwoala 2011, Omole et al 2015, Obeta 2019). Some of the factors include bureaucratic inefficiency, weak financial performance of water supply and sanitation utilities, poor maintenance of water and wastewater networks, power supply interruptions, and corruption. Other challenges include political interference, poor coordination between federal and state actors, and the inability of State Water Agencies to recover operating costs, focused on infrastructure rehabilitation and lacking commitment and accountability (Wutich et al 2016). Overall, Nigeria's water scarcity is a human-made condition, underscored by a disconnect between Nigeria's abundant water resources and the government's willingness to harness these resources and prioritize provision of basic services to poor households, especially in rural areas.

Access to clean drinking water therefore remains a pipe dream for many. About 90 million Nigerians – out of a population of approximately 200 million – lack water that is suitable for drinking (Obeta 2019, Ezenwaji et al 2016). In many rural communities, water supply schemes have collapsed. Most rural villages and small towns face severe and persistent challenges in meeting their water needs, with 61% of the rural population living more than 30 minutes away from a water source and a further 34% living more than 2 hours away (World Bank 2019).

As a result, millions of Nigerians rely on non-state water providers, which include formal and informal for-profit water provision. This paper focuses on informal for-profit water services providers (PPWSPs), many of which are providing crucial services in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. PPWSPs are individuals or small and micro-enterprises that generate, treat and distribute water to households or businesses as commercial or business undertakings (Obeta 2019, Adeleye et al 2014). They deliver water at the grassroots levels in small towns and rural areas which otherwise have no access to water services.

While PPWSPs are not a direct response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the sector provides much-needed intervention for combating the virus. PPWSPs have stepped into the gap to make water available to millions and are helping to alleviate the water-related challenges associated with the pandemic.

AND THE PPWSPS SAID, LET THERE BE WATER!

The massive failure of public water infrastructure in Nigeria has helped to crystalize and expand the role of informal water providers. They offer solutions ranging from water tanker deliveries, domestic wells, boreholes and hand-carried water containers. These actors help consumers meet their water needs by offering a range of different options for water supplies. In some communities, there are no alternatives.

PPWSPs have no formal responsibility for water supply services but invest in water infrastructure and operate as small businesses in areas where public water infrastructure is lacking (Akpomunje 2010). PPWSPs usually get their water from streams, rivers and boreholes using water tankers and pushcarts. Tanker operators deliver water to homes or commercial locations that can afford to buy large quantities of water, often for resale to people who can only afford to buy in small quantities. Sometimes water vendors deliver water directly to consumers in their homes in jerrycans. There are also sachet producers who package water in sachets which can be directly consumed. It is the affordability factor of sachet water which makes it accessible and popular.

PPWSPs are actively involved in rural water supplies in all 36 states of Nigeria (Ofoezie 2003, Okeje 1989). They are also in small towns and in large cities. Despite this, they are largely neglected by government. The tanker water suppliers and the sachet water producers who substantially invest in water services delivery are self-funded. Many of them are not much financially stronger than the population they serve. Most times, their equipment is old and

in poor shape. The water tankers regularly break down. PPWSPs have no access to loans but they are loosely unionized in producers' associations. A sachet water producer and a member of the union in Otukpo stated that the members meet regularly to address their challenges and to control market pricing (D. Ochoga, personal communication, July 7, 2020). According to her, some of the problems encountered by the members include "distance to the source of water, ageing vehicles and operation machines, irregular and high cost of electricity, lack of manpower, particularly machine operators and high cost of the packaging materials".

PPWSPs as a boost to the economy

In Nigeria, employment opportunities in the formal sector are minimal. The large informal sector is made up of small business enterprises almost always individually owned and, in many cases, requiring very little investment. PPWSPs make up a significant portion of the informal sector in Nigeria. According to the National Agency for Food and Drugs Control (NAFDAC), the standards regulating body for the PPWSPs sector, "packaged water especially the sachets (pure water) production is a good poverty alleviation program and should be encouraged. It is an industry that has immense potentials for job and income generation" (Muhammad and Dansabo, 2018, 48).

The PPWSPs sector is not only a direct source of employment for thousands of people; it also helps support others small businesses that depend on water for their operation. Small businesses such as food services providers, laundry services providers, food grinding machines operators, through the PPWSPs, have access to water and can launch and operate their businesses. Where businesses are allowed to operate during the pandemic, PPWSPs are helping to sustain the livelihoods of many young people and reduce mass poverty (Kjellen 2000, Muhammad and Dansabo 2018, Obeta 2019).

Promoting public health

Water and sanitation remain the major primary drivers of public

health. Lack of access to safe water creates vulnerability to the threats of water-related diseases, including diarrhea, cholera, typhoid fever, salmonellosis, dysentery, and other gastrointestinal viruses (Muta'a Hellandendu 2012, 115), which are common in Nigeria. Because PPWSPs deliver water directly to homes and businesses, PPWSP vendors are essential service providers who allow others to observe physical distancing when possible and quarantine when necessary.

Speaking to a mother after she delivered her baby in the hospital, she noted that she was very thirsty but could not drink the water in the hospital because it came directly from the borehole and was not treated. She had sachet water delivered instead. When asked how she would cope with the water situation with a new baby, she stated that her husband had arranged with a water vendor for regular delivery to her home (J. Ken, personal communication , July 20, 2019).

Supporting gender equality

Access to water in Nigeria is a gendered issue. Women and girls bear the brunt of inadequate access to water services, spending as much as a quarter of their waking hours fetching water for their household (Omole and Ndambuki 2014, Omole et al 2015). Speaking on the positive impact of PPWSPs in her community, a woman who grew up in Otukpa in Benue State in the 1980s, captured her experience in this way (K. Iga, personal communication, July 4, 2020):

I cannot tell you how long we walked, but I am sure it was not less than twenty kilometers, to the stream and back. We (women and girls) got up around 6 in the morning and got back around 9.00 am. Most of the young girls like myself could carry no more than 10 to 20 liters of water and the older women up to 40 liters. This is because of the distance and also because the water is carried in open contains such as clay pots, pails and buckets which make water more difficult

to transport. Sometimes some will have an accident, miss a step and fall, losing their water. In such cases, the others would contribute a cup or two of their water so the person can at least go home with some water. The girls always got to school late, tired and sometimes not at all. In the rainy season, we collected surface water runoffs which came from up the hills where open defecation takes place. We tried to treat the water using alum, but people still fell ill from using it. Today all that is changed. Thanks to the PPWSPs, most of that has changed. I went home to bury my father in 2019 and the transformation was significant. We had water tankers deliver water throughout the event. Every activity that required water, from cooking, to laundry and personal were performed without any hitches. We purchased tons of sachet water at reasonable cost and everyone had water to drink. Although at some cost, there is a level of access to water which would be impossible without the PPWSPs.

Due to family responsibilities, lack of skills, and social and cultural barriers, the informal water sector can also be one of the few ways that women have to access employment to earn an income (Fapohunda 2012, 35). PPWSPs have therefore become an important part of transforming gender norms and mitigating the unnecessary cost of accessing water for girls and women, especially among the most vulnerable. Access to water also means that women and girls are better positioned to deal with the Covid-19 crisis.

Providing water to the poor

A 2019 World Bank report finds that water subsidies disproportionately benefit higher-income households, particularly with networked systems (Andres et al 2019). In Nigeria, while only 48% of poor Nigerians have some access to public water delivery services, about 80% of wealthy Nigerians have access to at least an essential supply. In other words, public water delivery services target

the wealthy in affluent neighborhoods, and government-reserved areas, mostly in urban centers. The delivery of water to the wealthy means that the actual beneficiaries of subsidized public water are the wealthy, since the poor are generally not connected to the piped grid. According to one study, public water sources are 4–10 times cheaper than private sources (Jideonwo 2014). This means that increasing subsidies to public providers will not resolve the inequality gap without a massive expansion of public, networked infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the immense contributions of the PPWSPs in providing access to water for low-income households in Nigeria, the sector is not without challenges. For one, the safety of the water is often questionable, especially sachet water (ironically referred to as “pure water”). This concern led to a proposed gradual nationwide ban on packaged water by the national regulator. But because of the invaluable service which the sector provides, especially to women and the poor, the proposal was not implemented, and the sector continues to thrive (Dada 2009). Without PPWSPs people in most small towns and rural areas in Nigeria would be in continuous crisis, and Covid-19 would be an unmitigated disaster.

Covid-19 has therefore shone additional light on the urgency of building effective, reliable and affordable public water. It is incomprehensible that the Nigerian government, with all its resources and support from international organizations cannot provide water for its citizens. If the PPWSPs, with very limited resources, can distribute water effectively to the poor at the grassroots, why is it so difficult for the government of Nigeria to provide water to its citizens?

The government can also provide better guidance for the operation of PPWSPs. First, an improved policy environment should include the provision of technical assistance to help design, construct, operate and maintain their infrastructure. Technical assis-

tance should also provide support with related infrastructure that facilitates water distribution, particularly roads and electricity. Second, the 2000 National Water Act of Nigeria and/or the NAFDAC standards specifications state that all domestic water supplies should be clean and drinkable. Policy should cover regulation and monitoring to ensure that PPWSPs comply with these specifications. Third, policy should provide incentives to promote efficient water services delivery. Such incentives could include provision of soft loans for production and delivery equipment. Finally, policy should inform mechanisms that safeguard the interest of consumers and protect them from exploitation, extortion or price gouging.

Access to water lies at the heart of development anywhere. To achieve its development goals, Nigeria must reactivate its under-performing public water agencies and harness its immense natural water resources to facilitate the supply of water to all its citizens. In the meantime, PPWSPs play a central role in this realizing this goal

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