Piercing Challenges and Implications of Privatization on Water Sectors and Options for Sustainability in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines piercing challenges and implications of privatization on potable water management in Cameroon stemming from the historical, national and global policies, to options for sustainability. The major aim of the paper is to examine the challenges and implications of privatized companies managing potable water in Cameroon using the exploratory approach of data analysis supported with diagrams. As a result, data obtained from personal observation, interviews and secondary sources were used to capture the objectives of the inquiry. The paper observed that despite the classification of Cameroon as a water surplus country; the country's 27 million inhabitants are confronted by the hardships of obtaining potable water supply and they experience a low standard of living. This is due to the piercing challenges of potable water development process over time from the past to present. Non-existence of proper water policy and water law in the presence of water sector institutions that are not properly developed in Cameroon have, thus, reinforced the situation of poor supply of potable water in the country. As a result, the paper concludes that the poor supply of potable water in Cameroon is attributed to government policy of privatization of water management institutions and structures; it suggests many options for sustainable development of water institutions in the country. Like an integrated water resource management approach which can sustainably manage water resources without compromising the need of the future generation.

Keywords: piercing challenges, implications, privatization, water sector, options for sustainability, Cameroon.

Introduction

Cameroon accounts for 15 percent of the total annual water resources of the Central Africa Region (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2003). Among African countries, Cameroon ranks second in water resources potentials after the Democratic Republic of Congo (Sigha-Nkamdjou, Sighomnou & Lienou, 2002). However, despite the abundance of water in the country, the resource is not being harnessed efficiently to satisfy the needs of her increasing population (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund/World health Organization [UNICEF/WHO], 2008).

For instance, laws were created like Law No.84/13 of 5th December 1984 laying down regulations governing water resources which entrusted the management and protection of natural resources to the state. In August 1964 the Federal Republic of Cameroon extended the convention between the country and the company Electricité du Cameroun to the Societé Nationale des Eaux du Cameroun [SNEC] to supply water to the entire country.

Prior to the arrival of the colonial administrators in Cameroon in 1900 AC, all national resources, including water, were managed by local communities or villages. Each community had a supreme chief (SCC) who was assisted by the Village Council (VC) to administer the resources in the community.

The colonial government developed a three – tier model to organize and manage the delivery of drinking water in the country. At the top tier, the Secretary General of the Colony (SGC) had the oversight of the entire scheme in the country and controlled the budget. The operationalization of the scheme was devolved to the High Commissioner (HC) at the provincial level. The HC was made responsible for overall management of drinking water in the province. This constituted the second tier. The third tier was at the district level where activities were supervised

and monitored by District Officers (DOs) in both rural and urban areas. Furthermore, to facilitate the development of water structures for drinking water delivery, the colonial administration created the Public Works Department (PWD) to provide engineering and other technical support to the community. For this purpose, groundwater was considered as a major source for drinking water supply and emphasis was heavily placed on digging boreholes and supplying necessary technology to the community.

Sector Stakeholders

The key sector stakeholders and how they have shaped the development of the water sector in Cameroon can be discussed as follows:

SNEC (Société Nationale des Eaux du Cameroun): It was created by Cameroon government in 1968 to provide water supply across the country. Preparations for the privatization of SNEC began in 1991 as part of an IMF structural adjustment package. After nearly 4 years of negotiations with French multinational ONDEO Services - formerly Suez-Lyonnaise des Eaux and now part of Suez Environnement - the acquisition of SNEC did not materialize. According to sources close to the Technical Commission in charge of privatization, the acquisition failed because the price of CFA 500 million ONDEO offered for 51% of SNEC was much below the CFA 300 billion SNEC was assessed to be worth (Panapress, 2003). In other words, ONDEO offered less than 1% of what the government asked for. It was also reported that the offer made by ONDEO Services only focused on the six urban centers and neglected the sparsely populated towns of Cameroon. As such ONDEO Services aimed to cream off the areas considered to be profitable (Panapress(17 September 2003). Suez reported to be the only bidder for SNEC the privatization process came to a standstill. The public asset holding company Cameroon Water

Utilities Corporation (Camwater) was created in 2005 to facilitate the establishment of a Public Private Partnership (PPP) and attract investors (Africa News, 2006; IMF, 2006). Camwater was to manage water infrastructure while the private partner would be responsible for service delivery (IMF, 2006; Water and sanitation report in Cameroon, 2006). Camwater started operating on 31st March 2006 (Africa News, 2016). It was put in charge of the managing, financing and construction of all the infrastructure for the capture, production, transport and storage of water as well as control over water quality. As such Camwater took over the activities of SNEC (with the exception of maintenance and operation activities) as well as its assets, liabilities and also its employees (Primier Ministre du Cameroun, 2005). Through Camwater the Cameroonian government intended to invest over CFA two hundred billion (currently €30.6 million) in the extension and rehabilitation of water supply networks across the country over the following ten years (Africa News, 2006). It was announced in 2007 that a consortium of the Office National de l'Eau Potable (ONEP), the national water supply company of Morocco, and the Moroccan companies DELTA HOLDING and INGEMA had won a 10-year lease contract with Camwater (IMF, 2006). Through this public private partnership (PPP) the consortium, named Camerounaise des Eaux (CDE), became responsible for operating water supply while Camwater remained in charge of running the infrastructure. (Africa News (1 October 2007), (Fonjong et al, 2017). The contract between CDE and Camwater was signed on 2nd May 2008 and was to expire in May 2018. It was hailed by the World Bank as "the first example of a true South-South PPP in the (Western and Central African) region", and constituted one of the largest water PPPs in the region by population served. (Fall, M. et al, 2009). In 2011, ONEP merged with Morocco's publicly-owned energy generation and distribution enterprise ONE (Office national de l'électricité) to form the new public agency ONEE (Office

national de l'eau et de l'électricité). The merger aimed at facilitating the development of water and energy services in Morocco's rural areas where the private sector had less interest in investing because these were less profitable than large cities like Casablanca and Rabat. Since 2012, ONEE became the leading partner in CDE.

Impact of sector policies to access to water

Some of the sector policies provided water plants in rural and urban areas like Yaounde, Douala, Buea and Kumba and supply water in public taps and to some people houses through pipes. They were less stress in acquiring water in urban areas during periods of abundant water supply. According to News Watch Cameroon (30 April 2013), there were water interruptions before the privatization of SNEC but the situation worsened when service management moved from public to private hands. These sectors policies negatively impacted the population by taxing them high bills even during periods of water shortages. This is in line with Fonjong, *et al*, 2017, who stated that, the constant water shortages, the irregular supply, and high bills made it difficult for the poor to cope.

The main aim of the sector policies to access and supply water to the population have been that of profit making motive as less attention is given to the plight of the water users; the implications are as follows:

The peri-urban populations have gotten a lot of mixed feelings as sector policies roles are concerned in terms of potable water supply. Most of the peri urban population of Cameroon depends on untreated boreholes, Wells, rivers and sea water for survival once there are shortages in terms of potable water supply by the government or privatized sectors in water management. As a result, there is an increased in the intake of disease contraction like diarrhea, dysentery and typhoid fever result from the use of untreated water. This is in line with (WHO, 2000), who stated that, more than 5 million people die each year from diseases caused by unsafe drinking water sources, lack of sanitation and hyhiene.

Furthermore, abandonment of water drilling project in Buea, south west region of Cameroon in January 2022 by one of the privately owned company is an indication to note that without the profit involved, private companies can never have the interest of the public. The borehole project was already at an advanced stage of completion. But because of financial shortage it was abandoned and the company packed out. (See Figure 1below).

Figure 1: Abandoned project of water drilling in Great Soppo, Buea because of low payment.

As for the rural population, they are highly impacted and contract many diseases as well, with higher death rates recorded every year because of the use of untreated water sources. Also, women and children are the highest class of people highly affected as the task of providing water for households use depended on them. They easily contract diseases in the process of fetching water for daily use and in the consumption of poor quality water. As such the death rate in the population of women and children is by far higher. Table 1,

Table 1: Areas and level of disease contraction

Areas	**Level of diseases contracted**
Peri urban	Low level disease contraction

Rural population	High level disease contraction
Women and children	High level disease contraction

In 2010, more than 600 Cameroonians died from a cholera outbreak, according to official Public Health sources while reports of more cholera outbreaks keep coming and this disease is largely attributed to the absence of clean potable water and poor sanitary conditions (Nkemngu2011). This high death rate was as a result of the high level diseases contracted in rural areas and by women and children. And this is largely attributed because of the use and consumption of poor quality water which is not adequately treated in Cameroon. Health personnel's in the south west region of Cameroon precisely in the town of Limbe municipality indicated that, more than 200 persons are being affected with diarrhea diseases, dysentery and typhoid fever. Indicating that, more than 500 person are affected yearly with these diseases as a result of water scarcity in this municipality.

Major means of access to water for rural and urban populations during periods of potable water shortages

The major ways through which peri urban and rural populations acquire water for household use are as follow;

Most of the peri urban population of Cameroon acquires water for household use from boreholes, Wells, rivers and sea water for survival once there are shortages in terms of potable water supply by the government or privatized sectors in water management.

As for the rural population, they tend to depend on natural streams and they often trek longer distances to fetch water in rivers once there is failure in the community

water management projects. The major challenges face by the rural and urban population in acquiring water for household uses is longer distances and a lot of time wastage in going to fetch (Table 2).

Table 2: Areas with access to water and challenges in accessing water

Areas	Access to water	Challenges faced
Peri-urban	Boreholes, rivers, sea water and community water.	Long distances and time wastage
Rural	Streams and rivers	Longer distances and time wastage

Discussions on the challenges faced

As seen from the table above it was indicated that the rural population of Cameroon often faces the challenge of trekking for longer distances to fetch water during period's severe shortage. According to Sigha-Nkamdjou, Sighomnou & Lienou in 2002, Among African countries, Cameroon ranks second in water resources potentials after the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, despite the abundance of water in the country, the resource is not being harnessed efficiently to satisfy the needs of her increasing population (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund/World health Organization [UNICEF/WHO], 2008). This is true with the facts that Cameroon has not provided an integrated water management board or a training school to effectively manage and supply potable water resources to its increasing population. As such the rural and urban population often goes for longer distances in search of water resources especially during periods of water shortages.

The tariff collection methods are the key strategies employed by the water agencies for tariff collection. Water is financed in Cameroon through water meters which are being check monthly to determine the consumption rate of a household. The role of tariffs in Cameroon is that it serves as a source of revenue to the government the sectors involved in water management through taxes paid in using potable water resources. It also protects domestic industries managing water resources in Cameroon. Tariffs were collected through water bills after reading individual household meters. In areas where they were resistance to pay water bills concerning high bills, water was disconnected from the household. And this was done in several ways, in some local areas they contributed highly before some water projects were set up in such areas. While in some urban areas of Cameroon payment of water services is through bills. In some areas like in the city of Douala and in the town of Buea and Limbe in the south west region, high bills were being paid for water services taxed by the privatized companies. This tariff collection method was implemented by privatized companies in the colonial period and now taken over by government even in the midst of increasing water challenges.

Coping mechanisms of rural and urban populations

Some of the main ways through which the population without access to safe potable water copes include going for longer distances to fetch for potable water in natural or polluted streams and rivers especially in the rural areas. The urban population depends on dug wells, boreholes, rivers and water catchment areas that are not protected. According to the UN-Habitat, 2014, rapid urbanization demands adequate policies, technology and efficient stakeholder participation to accommodate emerging urbanization problems, such as potable water supply. Contrary to this, the urban and the rural areas of Cameroon hardly engage in efficient stakeholder participation in managing and supplying potable water

resources. Since the privatized companies were out for profit motives, it becomes a difficult task for them to involve the local population in water management, table 3.

Table 3: Coping mechanisms of rural and urban population

Areas	**Coping mechanism**
Rural population	Streams and rivers
Urban population	Wells, catchments, rivers, boreholes, and water catchment areas

People's response to water privatization/commercialization policies

What has been the response of people to policies negatively impacting their access to water?

The response of people to policies negatively impacting their access to water supply couple with high bills and inadequate supply has been numerous;

Firstly, the response of the rural population is that government should intervene and take over the project of potable water management and supply from private companies and fully manage it itself. Also, others are of the opinion that they should go back to the colonial period where water projects were being funded and allowed to be manage by the local community itself and supervise by the district officers. This event have been taking place in most urban areas of Cameroon, the most frequent scenario took place in Mile 4 Limbe, south west region of Cameroon where the women staged a protest march twice in 2018 demanding for the re-establishment of potable water. They had complained that for over two months

water has not been flowing in their taps despite having contributed 2000 FRS for each room for necessary repair works by the chairman of the water management committee. The women indicated that they are forced to trek long distances to fetch water from untreated sources. However, they were reassured by traditional and administrative authorities that a solution will be found immediately for water supply to be restored in Mile 4 Bonadikombo, Limbe municipality.

According to Meera K. and Satoko in 2018, many cities, regions and countries have chosen to close the book on private water and to bring services back into public control. This is in line with the urban areas of Cameroon where the urban population have often abuse the efforts of privatized companies as their aim is based on the profit making motive. Because of the increasing population in urban areas of Cameroon, a series of negative responses have been posed to water privatization policies. The urban educated class are seeking for government intervention in taking over water management, setting schools to teach and train personnel's in managing and developing water project that can sustainably supply water to urban areas without compromising the future needs. And other government officials are of the opinion that the supply of potable water will be achieved in the entire country by setting up many water catchments in all the regions. Nevertheless, the responses are so many and the challenges of accessing potable water in many communities can only be resolved if the government gives a listening ear to the crisis of the population and take over the management of water from private companies.

According to the UN-Habitat, 2014, rapid urbanization demands adequate policies, technology and efficient stakeholder participation to accommodate emerging urbanization problems, such as potable water supply. The situation in Cameroon is not yet in line with this statement as there are no adequate policies, technology and

efficient stakeholder participation in water management. At the close of MDGs, the sustainable development goals (SDGs) further emphasized the need to cater for urban development needs of cities. For instance, SDG 11 (make cities and human settlements, inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable) and specifically Target 11.1 (ensure access to basic urban services), still to be realize by the government of Cameroon even though there is rapid and continuous increased in the population of urban areas.

Conclusions

This paper provides historical information about the development of the water sector in Cameroon indicating major arguments and, worldviews to their current stage and objectives. In the colonial period everybody in the community participated in the provisioning of the communal water supply point but in a sporadic way without a common water networking system. The water sector stakeholders have been discussed with the influencing sector policies, and the impacts with major means of access to water for rural and urban population have been examined. Also their tariff collection methods, coping mechanisms and people's responses to water privatization policies have critically been access before giving room to options of sustainable development of potable water in Cameroon.

Options for potable water sustainability in Cameroon opposing to water privatization

There are top six reasons to oppose water privatization and encourage government takeover of water management in Cameroon;

1) Privatization cannot encourage the approach of integrated water resource management in a foreign country but the government can.

This is true in that, nongovernmental organization companies go into a foreign country with its own team already set up to operate in that country with its aims. But government can easily adopt the approach of integrated water resource management and promotes the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources, paving the way towards sustainable development, in an equitable manner without compromising the needs of the future generation. Therefore the activities of privatization is strongly discourage in the management of water resources in Cameroon.

2) Privatization cannot encourage the creation of a training school to train personnel on how to tap and manage water sources in a foreign country; only the government of that country can do so.

It is a difficult task for a foreign company to create an impact that can last in a particular country because its main focus is always profit maximization. That is the government of Cameroon should preferably import foreign technology and create training schools to train its citizen on how to sustainably tap, manage and supply potable water without depending on foreign companies.

3) Privatization Undermines Water Quality while government cannot.

This is because the profit motive drives the corporate agenda rather than serving the public interest, as a result they cannot bother on producing quality water for the public interest. Therefore, for government to effectively have the interest of the public water users, they need to abolish the idea of privatization and sustainably manage and supply quality water to the population. For water is life and brings economic and social development. Sustainable management of water resources by the government will lead to the supply of quality water to its citizen.

4) Privatization Fosters Corruption while government can easily discourage corruption. The very structures of privatization encourage corruption. Checks and balances that could prevent corruption, such as accountability and transparency, are conspicuously missing from the process. With privatization, water contracts are being worked out behind closed doors, while government officials can easily discourage corruption by restructuring water projects and working in the public interest of its citizen. Therefore privatization especially in potable water management projects need to be discouraged as it comes alongside with corruption.

5) Privatization Reduces Local Control and Public Rights while government can encourages local control and maintains its public rights and dignity

When water services are privatized, public control is transferred to a corporation, be it domestic, foreign or transnational. Once water rights have been signed over very little can be done to ensure that the private company will work in the best interest of the community since their interest and focus is based on profit maximization than minimization. Again, the prime directive of private water companies is to maximize profits, not protect consumers. More so, government need to implement effective policies and laws that can increase local control in managing water resources in order to reduce the issues of water shortages.

6) Privatization can leave the poor with no access to clean water meanwhile government can easily increase the water supply to reach the poor.

Contrary to public assertions, the role of the IMF and World Bank in water privatization schemes in the developing world actually results in a reduction of access to water for the poor. “Structural-adjustment” programs forced upon governments seeking loans often include water privatization as a condition for these loans. And the end result is that such privatized companies easily leave the

poor with no access to clean water but government that controls its country population can easily listen to the cry of the poor and extend access to clean water to deprived areas. The role of the IMF and World Bank in water privatization need to be discourage not only in Cameroon or Africa but also in all parts of the world because its consequences deprived the poor from access to clean water.

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