

Implications of Water Privatisation for Poverty Reduction and Urban Development in Nigeria

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One of the main targets of the Millennium Development Goals is to reduce the proportion of the world's population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. The paper reviews the nature and scale of private sector provision of water in Nigeria, and questions the role that privatization can play in achieving the MDGt target by 2015. It tries to ascertain whether it is the private companies or the urban poor that benefit more from how the privatization of water supply operates in the country. Despite the fact that this approach is being vigorously promoted in the policy arena, and adopted in some states in Nigeria (Lagos, Ogun and Cross-River), there are difficulties in reconciling a commitment to universal provision of water with a market oriented approach of commodifying water supply. Obviously, privately operated utilities are not well suited to serving the needs of low-income households, with the result that most low-income households tend to rely on expensive water vendors and other unsuitable sources for their supply. The paper points out how this trend can constrain urban development in Nigeria, and argues instead for the urgent review of water policies in the country in order to remove the inconvenience and the barriers which the privatization of water and sanitation services pose for the poor in Nigerian cities. Lastly, the scenario in Nigeria is such that the central government is strongly committed to water privatization while significant stakeholders are resisting it. Legislators and labor unions oppose privatization because it implies an unwarranted reduction the role and social responsibility of the state. These conflicting positions reflect deep-seated ethnic and regional differences in Nigerian society, and these need to be resolved in order to secure the much needed consensus on an equitable approach to water supply and sanitation in the country.