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"Water is Life": The African Water Conundrum

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"Water is Life"[1] is a sentiment shared by almost everyone on the African continent. These are also the first words written in virtually every introductory text on the subject of water in Africa. This simple phrase highlights the significance of water to the people of Africa, and is amplified by the current dire lack of clean water on the continent.

The importance of water is not new and is well known around the world, but its severe absence in Africa, in which only 68% of the entire African population have access to improved water and 32% are left with unimproved water, is stupefying.[2] This is not the case in the West and is in fact the highest percentage of water provision deficiency in the world.[3] Current reports from Cape Town, South Africa, and Nairobi, Kenya, which state the extreme water shortage that the two cities are facing, highlight the serious state of water in the continent, but these are mere examples. With the knowledge of the existence of climate change since the mid-20th century,[4] and the

[1] A very common phrase in the African continent; 2005-2015 was declared the international decade for action 'water for life' by the UN and which I have documented many times in my interviews with people from Siaya, Kenya.
[2] Improved drinking water includes "public taps, or standpipes, tube wells or boreholes, protected dug wells, protected springs, rainwater collection" It is important to remark that in some areas piped water is not clean. Unimproved water sources mean "Surface drinking water sources: River, dam, lake, pond, stream, canal, irrigation channels. Or: Unprotected dug well, unprotected spring, cart with small tank/drum, tanker truck, bottled water…" UNICIEF and WHO, "25 progress on sanitation and drinking water – 2015 update and MDG assessment report," accessed February 1, 2016. http://www.wssinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/resources/JMP-Update-report-2015_English.pdf p. 50.
[3] Oceania has 48% unimproved water, but due to the small population, this figure has not been addressed.
[4] "Climate change: How do we know?" *NASA*, accessed April 1, 2018. https://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/.

presence of phenomenal technical know-how as well as existing technology, how did the African continent reach this situation? This article investigates the current water situation in Africa and focuses on the macro global-political circumstances which aggravated the current water crisis.

The Water Situation on the African Continent

The needs of the African population for clean water access are not currently being met by the systems in place for clean water production, distribution, and services. This is especially so in the case of the rural population and the urban poor. The continent did not meet Target 7C of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals – "to halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation."[5] Water demand has been spurred by a number of factors. These include population growth – Africa has the youngest population in the world, urbanization, industrialization, change of consumer patterns, lack of conservation and mismanagement.[6] Shortages, rationing, and water queues are a regular phenomenon in Africa.

According to all global water scarcity analyses, up to two-thirds of the world population will be affected by water stress by 2025.[7] In addition, rural areas in developing countries are the worst hit by the existing water crisis and sub-Saharan Africa has the largest number of water-stressed countries of any region. The particular situation of Cape Town and Nairobi is the direct result of a drought affecting several African regions, which is now going into its fourth year. The once stable rainy season, which historically was the main source for replenishing the dams and other water resources of the great cities of Africa, is no longer reliable; as a result reservoirs are constantly drying up. Cape Town, one of the more affluent cities of Africa, has been affected by drought and declining storage levels since 2015. Residents currently receive an allowance of just

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[5] "United Nations Millennium Development Goals", *United Nations*, accessed 1 February 2016. http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/

[6] David Seckler, et al., "World water demand and supply 1990 to 2025," *Scenarios and issues* (research report 19), Colombo. Sri Lanka, IWMI (1997).

[7] Frank R. Rijsberman, "Water scarcity: fact or fiction?" *Agricultural Water Management*, 80. no1 (2006): 5-22; United Nations, "Managing water under uncertainty and risk," World water development report 4. Paris UNESCO publishing 2012, accessed 1 February 2016. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002156/215644e.pdf

50 liters per day and are awaiting "Day Zero," or the day on which taps will run dry, currently deferred to 2019.[8]

Rationing has been common since January 2017 in Nairobi and other Kenyan cities, where the water supply has decreased to 505,000 cubic meters. This represents a significant deficit from demand levels, which reach approximately 760,000 cubic meters per day.[9] As a result, both cities have succeeded in gaining Western media attention as easily relatable examples, but they merely highlight a problem that has been faced by millions for decades. In fact, a staggering 44% of Africa's rural population lacks access to any organized supply of potable water and is thus reduced to drinking water from potentially contaminated sources.[10] In the best-case scenario, these sources include rivers, but often ponds, which are more likely to be contaminated and represent the only source of drinking water for humans and animals alike.[11]

Behind these numbers lie individuals who live in harsh environments and under detrimental circumstances, ranging from droughts and famines, through health and hygiene problems caused by drinking non-potable water or from carrying burdensome water containers many kilometers on a daily basis. Taken together, these populations suffer increased rates of illness, food shortages, poverty, and gender inequality, alongside lower income and education levels. While there has been much hue and cry in the international community over the above issues on a rhetorical level, the issue of water has been largely ignored[12] on a practical level as an existential element to the future survival of these populations. At this date, there is still no viable solution in place to mitigate these issues.

There are several reasons why this particular crisis has been instigated. The first is perhaps the most obvious, namely climate change. Climate change was identified as early as the mid-20th century as a problem and has hit the African continent particularly hard, as it has always been

[8] David McKenzie and Brent Swails, "Day Zero deferred, but Cape Town's water crisis is far from over", *CNN*, March 9, 2018, accessed 1 April 2018. https://edition.cnn.com/2018/03/09/africa/cape-town-day-zero-crisis-intl/index.html

[9] Gilbert Koech "Nairobi water shortage looms as reservoirs drop", *The Star*, January 17, 2018, accessed 1 April 2018. https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2018/01/17/nairobi-water-shortage-looms-as-reservoirs-drop_c1698807

[10] "UNICIEF and WHO 25 progress"

[11] For Example, Jotigo Pond, in Kawino village, Rarieda sub-county, Siaya county, Kenya.

[12] David Grey and Claudia W. Sadoff, "Sink or swim? Water security for growth and development." *Water Policy*, 9 no 6, 2007: 545.

vulnerable to changes in climate and in water supply. As this is a well-known fact, the question remains: why are there no proper mitigation measures being put in place? The answer, of course, is complex, because it encompasses many interrelated issues. These include economic and socio-political inequality between rich and poor and between various ethnic groups, lack of planning and mismanagement of resources, politicization of water allocation, political corruption, and lack of motivation. All of the above have been discussed at length in the existing scholarly and professional literature.[13]

Another factor is economic scarcity. This concept has been defined by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI),[14] as a situation wherein countries have sufficient renewable resources, but would have to make very significant investments in water infrastructure to make these resources available to their people.[15] Most African countries fall within this category.
The root of the problem which this paper focuses on is the trajectory from an acknowledgment of the vital importance of water in Africa, to international interventions which are the main source of much-needed investments. Yet such interventions are typically based upon Western values, rather than acute African needs and the on-the-ground reality. This results in what could be termed the 'African Water Conundrum.'

The African Water Conundrum

One major problem aggravating the systemic lack of potable water on the African continent is the fact that international donor agencies have not given the issue the priority that it deserves. This has, in turn, trickled down to local governments. On paper, the issue is proclaimed to be indeed a significant problem being dealt with appropriately, but in practice this is not the case.

While the current water crisis was known as early as 2002, the MDG program deployed by the UN did not include a distinct target or goal dealing with it. Instead, it was delegated to subsection "C" under clause number 7 – "Ensure Environmental Sustainability." In contrast, the need for gender equality and female empowerment, or universal primary education both received

[13] Garrett Hardin, "The tragedy of the commons." *Science*, 162 no' 3859 (1968): 1243-1248; Antoine Frérot, *Water Towards a Culture of Responsibility* (New Hampshire, University of New Hampshire Press, 2011; Peter Gleick, "Soft path's solution to 21st-century water needs," *Science*, 320 (2003):1524–1528.
[14] Seckler, et al., "World water demand and supply 1990 to 2025".
[15] Rijsberman, "Water scarcity: fact or fiction?".

individual MDGs. Arguably, while these needs are indeed important they are nevertheless not existential.[16] Moreover, they reflect a particular vision and values belonging to the imagined ideal Africa in the eyes of the international community, but not reflecting Africa's actual current needs.

Soon thereafter, the 2003 3rd World Water Forum acknowledged that water for half of the population, as required by the MDGs, is simply not sufficient. But it was not until 2015, with the promulgation of the UN Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs) that clean water was delineated as a distinct goal. To this end, SDG 6.1 declared that its goal was to, "by 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all."[17] While an improvement, there is still much to criticize over the priority that water was given: it is the 6th goal named, out of a total of 17. Once again, the UN equates this existential resource below other important, but far less vital issues.

In addition, although it has been stipulated to be "a driver of progress on many of the SDGs, including health, nutrition, education and gender equality,"[18] there has been only moderate investment in water. The 2017 GLAAS Report, a joint publication of the UN and the WHO, stated that in order to meet the SDG global water, sanitation and hygiene targets, infrastructure investments need to triple to US $114 billion per year – a sum which does not include operating and maintenance costs[19] and for which in fact there is no current commitment. And yet, the Sustainable Development Goals Fund allocated a mere 6% of its funds to water and sanitation while inclusive economic growth received 37% and food security and nutrition received 57%.[20] The allocations made in the 2017 World Bank Budget represent other important examples. Out

[16] The author is not disputing the importance of these goals in any way but attempting to show that priorities are not necessarily based on what Africa needs now.
[17] "United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals", *United Nations*, accessed 20 January 2017. http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/
[18] "UNICIEF and WHO, Progress on Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Update and SDG Baselines, 2017", *UNICIEF*, accessed 27 July 2017. https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Progress_on_Drinking_Water_Sanitation_and_Hygiene_2017.pdf, p. iii
[19] "Financing Universal Water, Sanitation and Hygiene under the Sustainable Development Goals UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water GLAAS 2017 report,", *United Nations*, 2017, accessed 14 April 2017. http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/254999/9789241512190-eng.pdf;jsessionid=20D17F0372CEA18DE0C0D50B1E31BD56?sequence=1
[20] "financial-information", *The Sustainable Development Goals Fund*, accessed 15 April 2018. http://www.sdgfund.org/financial-information

of the $11.8B which was approved by the World Bank for 145 projects in Africa, only 14% was allocated for water, sanitation and hygiene. This amount is similar to the 14% allocated for energy and resource extraction, but less than the 18% allocated for transportation infrastructure.[21] In July 2016, the 'Water Security for Climate Justice' conference was held in Rabat, Morocco. During this conference, 22 African ministries confronted the conundrum by emphasizing what is so clear to them, but not to the Western donor countries: the importance of prioritizing implementation and funding for water initiatives in Africa, called "Water for Africa."[22] On a continent in which the phrase "Water is life" is so prevalent, an international program focusing solely on "water for all" provision, as a first and only priority, with a substantial amount of the overall international commitments, should have been set and budgeted a long time ago.

Conclusion

Efforts to truly provide "water for all" in Africa are stymied by a prevalent indifference in world public opinion, which is augmented by 'compassion fatigue' and a sense of discouragement and defeatism. This is due to a long history of unsuccessful plans and projects as much as it is to frequent hollow declarations made with no actual cover. African leaders and politicians need to improve their own behavior in regards to clean water provision. They need to enforce better planning, training, conservation, water infrastructure investment, and good water governance. The international community, for its part, cannot settle for silent empathy; there must instead be a profound and robust commitment to solve the crisis. Indeed, until the international community acknowledges that the water situation in Africa is uniquely critical and demands both a local understanding and immediate mitigation, funds will continue to be diverted to initiatives that do not serve this pressing need.

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[21] "Annual Report", *World Bank* ,2017, accessed 14 April 2017. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/27986/9781464811197.pdf

[22] "Water Security for Climate Justice", *World Water Council, International Conference on Water and Climate entitled,* Rabat, Morocco, July, 11-12, 2016, accessed 13 April 2017. http://www.worldwatercouncil.org/sites/default/files/Official_docs/20160722_Water_Security_for_Climate_Justice.pdf