

CITIZEN-CONTROLLED WATER SUPPLY SYSTEMS: LESSONS FROM BONADIKOMBO, LIMBE, CAMEROON

By Ambe J. Njoh

INTRODUCTION

One notable aspect of contemporary globalisation trends in Africa is the privatisation of public utility systems. The most common form of privatisation on the continent is “asset sale”. This involves the sale of government-owned public utility systems to private, profit-motivated corporations. Many strategies have been used to prevent the outright sale of these systems. One promising strategy in the water sector involves communities mobilising and assuming control of their own water supply systems. In some cases, communities develop their own systems from scratch and then proceed to manage them (Njoh 2006; Page 2005). However, details of the strategy remain largely unknown, especially in terms of what it entails in practice. This chapter intends to highlight crucial, practical aspects of the strategy. It will do this through an examination of a community-controlled water supply system in Bonadikombo (Limbe), Cameroon.

THE PROJECT

Bonadikombo, also known as Mile Four, is a small town about 6 km from Limbe on the Atlantic Coast. With the rapid level of urbanisation that Cameroon has been experiencing since the 1980s, Bonadikombo has grown from a small village of about 1,000 inhabitants to a town with a current population of about 7,000. Bonadikombo serves as a suburb of Limbe and has helped to ease population pressure there. Limbe is also the site of Cameroon’s main oil refinery.

By the late-1960s, Bonadikombo was a small town with an increasing need for urban services. The main need was for potable water and, in 1969, the village council agreed to address this. Feasibility studies conducted between 1970 and 1972 estimated that the project would cost 9 million francs CFA. The villagers were very aware of the newly-independent country’s tenuous financial situation. Hence, they expected very little, if any, assistance from the government. The implementation phase of the project began in 1973 and was successfully completed in 1981.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

The project implementation was coordinated by an appointed 14-member project committee, comprising of one chairperson, one secretary, one treasurer and 11 regular members (Njoh, 2003:93). Appointees of the committee doubled as leaders of local cells or wards of the Cameroon National Union (CNU) Party, which was the country’s sole political party at the time.

Table 1: Financial contributions to the Bonadikombo Water Project as of 1978

ITEM	CONTRIBUTOR	AMOUNT CONTRIBUTED	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL
1.	Bread for the World	2,452,195	22.75
2.	Department of Community Development	3,400,000	31.54
3.	Swiss Association for Technical Assistance (SATA) (later, Helvetas)	2,107,500	19.55
4.	Special Swiss Gov't Grant	1,728,960	16.04
5.	UNICEF	445,000	4.13
6.	Citizens (Community Members)	446,000	5.99
	TOTAL	10,779,655	100.00

Source: Njoh (2003).

The village chief and the Bonadikombo branch president of the CNU served as ex-officio members of the Water Project Committee. A community development assistant served as the liaison officer between Bonadikombo and the Department of Community Development, which was the national government body responsible for overseeing local community development projects.

The political cells served as units of organisation for the purpose of mobilising the labour, financial and other, local-level resources necessary for executing the project. In creating the work schedule, the project committee ensured that no cell worked on the project more than once during any given fortnight or two-week period.

In-kind contributions to the project were based on ability-to-pay. Accordingly, men and women were levied 2,500 frs and 1,300 frs CFA respectively. Individuals with business in the village but were resident elsewhere were levied 7,000 frs. Members of the project committee, who were generally better off than average members of the community, were levied 3,000 frs. (Njoh, 2003: 93). Also noteworthy is the gender-based scheme used to assign manual labour responsibilities in the project. Men were assigned the tasks of digging trenches and helping technicians such as plumbers and bricklayers. Women were responsible for gathering rocks, gravel and sand for concreting and related construction work.

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

A lot has transpired in the water supply sector in Cameroon since 1981 when the Bonadikombo self-help water supply project was completed (Ngnikam, 2004). The first development was the closure of government-operated public water fountains as part of efforts

to deal with the economic crisis of that era. The second was the creation of the Cameroon Water Corporation, a public corporation that has overseen affairs in the water sector since 2006. The third was the privatisation in of the state-owned water corporation *Société Nationale d'Eaux du Cameroun* (SNEC) in 2008, and the subsequent emergence of private water companies. It is important to note that private water companies such as SNEC are biased towards large urban centres, where they are guaranteed higher returns on their investments. Consequently, residents of small towns and villages are left to fend for themselves.

The project has proved to be resilient and has also benefited from structural re-organisation. It now includes a management committee of elected, as opposed to appointed, members, who serve as volunteers, with the exception of two wage-earning technicians. The committee is responsible for the daily operation of the water supply scheme whose coverage area has significantly expanded since 2002; the scheme has been gaining at least 27 new subscribers every year since 2007. To be eligible for private domestic connection, a subscriber must pay a one-time connection fee of 100,000 frs CFA and a yearly maintenance fee of 5,000 frs CFA (Ngnikam, 2008). Currently, Bonadikombo, with a population of 10,000, has 1,000 household domestic subscribers and 25 communally-operated and managed public water standpipes or fountains (ibid).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Bonadikombo or Mile Four water supply project exemplifies participatory planning in action. It shows how the various aspects of participation elaborated in participatory planning theory play out in practice by using elements of enlistment, cooperation and consultation. It involved enlistment by summoning in-kind and in-cash contributions from members of the community. Cooperation was critical to the project's success given that the source of water for the project is located in a different village or community. Consultation has been necessary since the project was initiated in the 1970s. Such consultation entailed passing out information to, and receiving feedback from, members of the community. Currently, as stated earlier, the scheme is managed by a post-implementation committee. Members of this committee are elected and are expected to be in constant liaison with residents of Bonadikombo.

The Bonadikombo Water Project lends credence to community participation as a strategy for delivering basic public services such as water. A closer look at the project reveals its strength in many other respects. As mentioned earlier, Bonadikombo is a suburb of Limbe, a city of some 120,000 inhabitants which is attractive to profit-driven, private water corporations. However, the water supply schemes in suburbs such as Mukundange, Batoke, and Bonadikombo remain in the hands of members of the respective communities. A comparison of the services provided by SNEC vis-à-vis the local communities (through their respective project management committees) is telling. For instance, as noted earlier, residents of Bonadikombo pay a one-time connection fees of 100,000 frs CFA and a yearly rate of 5,000 frs. (The one-time connection fee is waived for those who lived, or who owned property in the community during the initial project implementation phase in the 1970s and 1980s. Also, there are no charges for water from public standpipes.) In comparison, people are charged users' fees to fetch water from what, until 2008, used to be free-of-charge public water fountains. Furthermore,

connection fees in the city are in excess of 200,000 frs CFA and monthly charges hover around 10,000 frs CFA. This clearly demonstrates that water services are more affordable in Bonadikombo than within the Limbe inner city areas. The fact that the Bonadikombo water scheme has been in operation since 1981 proves its sustainability. In contrast, the Limbe water supply scheme, firstly under the Public Works Department (PWD) and later under SNEC, has failed to deliver on its promise of improving access to potable water for all of the city's residents. Water shortages and supply interruptions are frequent throughout the city. These problems are unknown in Bonadikombo.

LESSONS WORTH LEARNING

The self-help model appears to have served Bonadikombo very well on at least three major fronts that are crucial for development projects. First, by participating, even through weak modes such as enlistment, cooperation and consultation, the residents of Bonadikombo felt a sense of ownership of the project. Such a sense is necessary for project sustainability. This sense of ownership also served, and continues to serve, to motivate residents to contribute in-kind and in-cash to the project's success.

Second, there has never been any resistance from members of the community to contributing significant portions of their time and limited financial resources to the project. The people recognised their shared need for water and they are no strangers to the notion of people working together to address such needs. The collective provisioning and ownership of public infrastructure is rooted in indigenous African ethos. Forging a connection between development initiatives and the culture of their real or potential beneficiaries is crucial as a means of institutionalising such initiatives. With this in mind, it is safe to say that the Bonadikombo model is not only replicable but is recommended in resource-scarce settings.

A number of challenges and difficulties encountered by the project thus far are worth mentioning. For instance, financial and logistical problems led to a discontinuance of the project during the implementation phase. Since then, there have been a few post-implementation issues such as maintenance of the water system. This problem had since been resolved by hiring two partially paid/partially volunteering, locally-based permanent technicians.

As the population of Bonadikombo grows, its water supply system becomes increasingly attractive to private investors. However, it is unlikely that members of this impoverished community have the energy, fortitude and other resources necessary to fend off possible future hostile privatisation initiatives. Such initiatives were imposed on Cameroon in the 1980s/1990s by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This is where entities such as those involved in the international water justice movement come in. These entities must not relent in their efforts to educate the world about the need to protect and preserve water as a public good. They must be prepared to draw international attention to the plight of small communities such as Bonadikombo should there ever be an attempt to privatise their communal water supply system in future.

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