

Chapter 13

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AN OPPORTUNITY TO PAUSE AND REIMAGINE: JAMAICA'S PUBLIC WATER AFTER COVID-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought into sharp relief the threat to public health that accrues when segments of a population do not have access to public water. Water has emerged as a crucial element in the sanitization regime of hand-washing and surface cleaning that has proven successful in slowing the spread of contagion. Efforts in Jamaica to respond to the urgent need for universal public water access are revealing the magnitude of the financial challenge that the island's deteriorating water infrastructure poses for its main public water operator – the National Water Commission. The pandemic has also amplified the shortcomings of efforts to create public-private partnerships that focus on cost recovery of non-revenue water rather than investments in sustainable infrastructural alternatives.

This chapter argues that the Covid-19 pandemic has offered Jamaicans an opportunity to pause and re-evaluate the importance of universal public water access to island life and health, and the imperative of placing greater emphasis on innovations aimed at creating sustainable infrastructural upgrades rather than sophisticated technologies aimed at improving efficiencies in cost recovery.

INTRODUCTION

It is somewhat ironic that the name *Jamaica* derives from the word *Xaymaca* – a term meaning “land of wood and water” that was used by the earliest inhabitants, the Taino, to describe the island. This is a description that no longer characterizes the environmental conditions under which the people on this 11,000 km² island secure access to water. Although approximately 93% of the population have access to drinking water, there are great inequalities in the distribution, ease of access and cost of access, all of which have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. What has become clear in the wake of the coronavirus crisis is the scale of water mismanagement in Jamaica over the last 40 years and the need to reassess what it means to provide universal access to clean and safe water. As Arundhati Roy so aptly observes, the pandemic is a portal that has illuminated the inequalities of existing water management policies that expose specific populations to death and disease, but also an opportunity to re-imagine public water provision in ways that truly value universal access as a basic human right.

A quick perusal of aggregate statistics paints a picture of public water access in Jamaica that looks relatively good. In 2017, 90.6% of the population had access to at least basic drinking water services (World Development Indicators 2020), defined by the WHO/UNICEF (2020) as “drinking water from an improved source, such as piped water, boreholes or tubewells, protected dug wells, protected springs, and packaged or delivered water, whose collection time is not more than 30 minutes for a round trip.” This figure rose to 95.5% for people in urban areas and fell to approximately 85% in rural areas. Estimates published in the 2019 National Water Sector Policy and Implementation Plan provide a more detailed picture of access to water across the island. The plan indicates that approximately 70% of the population receive water via house connections provided by the main public water operator – the National Water

Commission (NWC), with the remaining 30% obtaining water from public standpipes; water trucks; wayside, community and rainwater catchment tanks; as well as rivers and streams (Government of Jamaica 2019).

But behind these figures lies a less impressive story of deteriorated infrastructure, restricted quality of service, highly unequal access and a significant transfer of provision costs to private households. While most Jamaicans have access to a drinkable water supply (National Water Commission 2020), the quality and quantity of the service provided is compromised by the ineffectiveness of its ageing water infrastructure (Government of Jamaica 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to light the inequalities and vulnerabilities of Jamaica's water regime. Not only has it amplified the inability of the island's deteriorating water infrastructure to provide households with continuous access to potable water, it has also illuminated the unacceptable levels of public health risk that inequalities in service provision impose upon low-income households.

DETERIORATING WATER INFRASTRUCTURE

Jamaica's deteriorating water infrastructure is the culmination of years of inadequate investment – a reflection of the island's ongoing indebtedness and economic crisis that has left much of the infrastructure laid down in the 1960s at the time of independence woefully under-maintained. The Jamaican auditor general estimated that levels of non-revenue water (water that is “lost” before getting to the consumer), were as high as 71%. In 2014 the agency calculated that of the 270 billion gallons of non-revenue water produced, approximately 49% was due to leakages and 51% to unpaid use (Auditor General's Department of Jamaica 2014). Combined with the low rainfall and drought conditions in parts of the island for almost a decade, consistent water supply continues to be an ongoing problem for households across the island. Water is routinely restricted, and in urban areas like Kingston it is not uncommon for piped wa-

ter to be suspended at night or on certain days during the week. Insecurity of water supply has become such a fact of daily life that even among the 70% of urban households who receive water from a piped source it is necessary to purchase water storage tanks in order to ensure a reliable supply. Without these tanks most households in Jamaica would not be able comply with the World Health Organization's washing and sanitation guidelines for keeping safe during the pandemic.

INSECURITY OF TENURE, INSECURITY OF WATER

For households in rural areas, where less than half the population have piped water access (Government of Jamaica 2008), and among the estimated 20% of the island's population living in Jamaica's 750 informal communities, water insecurity has already become a life-threatening affair (Ministry of Transport, Works and Housing 2014). For as the pandemic has already illustrated, it is impossible to keep safe when a household's only source of access to drinkable water is a shared pipe within a tenement yard serving multiple families, or a public standpipe shared by a wider community. In addition, as noted in the 2019 National Water Policy and Implementation Plan, public water sources are often far away from homes (Government of Jamaica 2019). Twenty-seven percent of those who obtain water from standpipes in rural areas and towns outside the Kingston Metropolitan Area (KMA) must walk more than 500 metres. Among low-income households with insecurity of land tenure, social distancing, handwashing and surface sanitizing guidelines have been difficult to achieve in the absence of a reliable piped water supply.

It is not surprising that the rural community of Portland Cottage in the southern parish of Clarendon was one of the early Covid-19 hotspots, with some of the first recorded cases of infection (Mundle 2020). Located in a flood-prone no-build zone, Portland Cottage is an informal settlement whose residents have tried to maintain a

long-term presence in the hope that their continuous occupation of the land might eventually be recognized and their informal land tenure regularized. But the informal nature of the community has been part of the reason why 25% of the 4,704 residents of Portland Cottage purchase the water they use, 23% rely on public standpipes, and 22% rely on private catchments (Social Development Commission 2020). As Jamaica's economic crisis deepens under the strain of the pandemic, low-income and unemployed households will find it increasingly difficult to finance the increased water Covid-19 hand hygiene and sanitation protocols, especially since the cost of privately trucked water is higher than that levied on a piped supply. As one recently interviewed Portland Cottage resident explained: "The water only a serve...a week now because we have to wash we hand more often, and a \$4,000 we have to pay every time, and we're unemployed, so it difficult....This [purchased water] used to all serve more than two weeks, but it can't right now. We round here woulda like be like normal people and get water inna we house too" (Hyman 2020).

RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In response to the pandemic, the National Water Commission waived late payment and reconnection fees between May 2020 and July 2020 and developed a Covid-19 Assistance Programme (CAP) that provided customers experiencing arrears in excess of 90 days with a 30% discount (Allen 2020). Estimated as a \$500 million loss of earnings, the relief program (subsequently extended to August 31, 2020) offered approximately 31,000 formal customers a respite from the threat of disconnection, while helping the loss-making company remain economically viable (Loop Jamaica 2020, Dawkins 2020). The NWC has also expanded its provision of water to communities outside of its utility zone by hiring private contractors to truck water to communities outside its supply area (Linton 2020).

The CAP is a welcome intervention that will help households in

financial distress and those faced with precarious access to water. But this intervention neither addresses the ongoing problem of restricted and unreliable water access that billed residential customers routinely experience, nor the difficulties faced by families without access to a piped source. These are structural challenges that speak to Jamaica's need to overhaul its water infrastructure. But importantly, these are interventions that would have been unlikely had the NWC been a private water operator.

PRIVATIZATION: A FALSE SOLUTION?

For the past five years, the NWC has operated under the threat of privatization. Operating at a loss for the past decade, the public utility (established in 1980) has struggled to increase public access, distribution and infrastructure upgrades while at the same time increasing its levels of cost recovery. Water provision in Jamaica has also tended to be costly because of the large amounts of energy needed to produce water. For example, in 2019, energy accounted for approximately 30% of the utility's operating costs (Government of Jamaica 2019). Recognizing the depth of the challenge facing the wider water sector, in 2002 the government indicated its commitment to an Integrated Water Resources Management approach aimed at creating an enabling environment for "the development and management of water, land and related resources, in order to maximize the resultant economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems" (Government of Jamaica 2002).

As part of this approach, the government has focused on making the NWC more energy-efficient in a bid to reduce the high levels of non-revenue water lost in the production process. One such initiative has involved a five-year public-private partnership with Miya, a company specializing in urban water efficiency solutions owned by the European private equity investment firm Bridgeport (Reuters 2019). Contracted at a cost of \$42.5 million dollars the Miya/

NWC partnership aims to achieve daily savings of 70 million litres of water per day in the Kingston Metropolitan Area (Miya 2015), potentially saving the country \$250 million over the first five years (Kebede 2015).

At first glance, the NWC/Miya public-private partnership appears to be a successful venture, achieving a reduction in non-revenue water losses in the communities of Nannyville and Rockfort from 80% to less than 30%. But the savings obtained from this poor community have come from increased efficiencies in customer billing rather than from investments to upgrade the city's crumbling water infrastructure. While government efforts to improve efficiencies in public water provision are welcomed, the interventions undertaken appear to be less motivated by the goal of universal access than the need to demonstrate the government's commitment to the principles of cost recovery – a prerequisite for International Monetary Fund (IMF) support and an important incentive for investor confidence (Government of Jamaica 2019, 53).

In 2015, the government indicated its intention to privatize the NWC, and since that time has continued to move ahead with plans for divestment despite calls to consider alternative ways of improving the agency while keeping it in public hands. At that time, then acting president of the water commission, Mark Barnett, opposed the privatization of the utility (Johnson 2015) arguing that the NWC had already embarked on the type of strategies to reduce existing inefficiencies that private corporations typically would – i.e. increased tariffs, investments in more efficient billing technologies and the introduction of charges for late payments. Barnett also argued that privatization would not necessarily lead to a reduction in operating costs given the utility's heavy reliance on high-cost energy and mooted the possibility of exploring options of incorporating renewable sources of energy (Johnson 2015). While the NWC's program of cost recovery was viewed as a much-needed strategy to reduce the losses it routinely incurred, it has tended to prioritize short-term cost recovery strategies like increased tariffs and short-

ened grace periods for late payments, rather than the long-term renewal of the infrastructure that lies at the heart of the island's water problems (National Water Commission 2018).

An appeal written by the Jamaica Association of Local Government Officers to the World Bank to withdraw its support for privatization also highlights some of the general concerns held by civil servants for the lack of benefits to the poor (Davis Whyte 2016, Campbell 2016). Citing the relationship between privatization and high consumer tariffs, cut-offs for households unable to pay, quality problems and a general lack of transparent governance, the association echoed many of the concerns that civil society groups the world over have voiced for the last 20 years. But like the World Bank, the Jamaican government has continued to support the idea of privatization because of the opportunity it would present to divest itself of \$29 billion of debt linked to an unfunded pension scheme that was placed on the NWC's books in 2004 (Loop Jamaica 2019).

In 2018, the government negotiated a JMD15 billion loan (the second-largest transaction of this nature in the country's history) from the National Commercial Bank (Saunders 2018). The loan has allowed the NWC to refinance JMD59 million in US-denominated loans owed to foreign interests and has made it possible for the NWC to carry out a number of capital projects aimed at further reducing existing non-revenue water levels. In effect, the bond issue has served as a market signal. As the Prime Minister has noted, "We are now creating the NWC as an asset in which pension funds, insurance funds, and insurance funds can invest. That sets the stage for possibly placing the NWC on the stock market, where Jamaicans can own a piece of the NWC in terms of shares" (Saunders 2018). Combined with the government's declared intention to forge a new business model with "an international business partner who understands water" in 2019 (Loop Jamaica 2019), the privatization of the National Water Commission appeared to be a *fait accompli* until March 2020 when the novel coronavirus ushered in the current global pandemic.

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic has offered Jamaica an opportunity to pause and re-imagine public water provision in ways that truly value universal access as a basic human right. Forty years of integration into global markets has decimated Jamaica's water infrastructure and left vulnerable communities at greater risk. As numerous scholars have argued, the principles embodied in the goals of universal water access do not sit well with market logics, and Covid-19 now reminds us the fate of our most vulnerable populations are intimately tied to those of our own. That the NWC has been able to respond to this crisis without resorting to market metrics to determine who should be supported and who should be abandoned, speaks to the difference between a mandate driven by profits and shareholder accountability, and one driven by the singular goal of universal access. If there is a lesson to learn from the Covid-19 pandemic it is that creative solutions abound – if we have a clear vision and the moral certitude to think beyond the logic of market fundamentalism. As Arundhati Roy reminds us, this terrible despair offers us a “chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality” (Roy 2020).

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