

Water and Politics in Africa: Wednesday 3rd September

Convenor: Ben Page (UCL)

In the arid conditions of Kensington Gore last September the idea that managing water resources is a thoroughly political process seemed entirely plausible. This single session set out to evaluate the effect of private sector participation in the water sector in Africa. After ten years of actively promulgating PSP the first generation of projects has reached a point where it is possible to start making some judgements about their impacts not only on social welfare but also on politics, and the place of public services in politics. The aim of the session was to look at a diverse geographical range of African examples from a diverse range of perspectives. The result was more successful in the latter respect than the former. Most of the examples were from southern Africa, with only a Nigerian example as a counterweight. Kate Bayliss (University of Greenwich) presented the results of a comparative analysis of different privatisations from an economic perspective. She concluded that privatisation had had relatively little impact. If a country has an effective water supply organisation before privatisation, then it is likely to continue to be successful after privatisation. If it is lousy before privatisation then it is likely to be lousy after privatisation too. Barbara Mwila Kazimbaya-Senkwe (University of Newcastle), talking about Zambia, drew attention to the decline in ambition that is associated with privatisation. Whereas historical evidence suggests that earlier planners aspired to high universal standards of water supply contemporary ideas use arguments about economic prudence to justify lower standards and differential standards. This was a trend that she argued should be contested. Alex Loftus (University of Oxford), using contemporary evidence of a more ethnographic character, addressed the South African 'free water' policy. He argued that despite its laudable aims this policy had some ambiguous consequences, particularly in the context of South Africa's high profile private sector water concessions. By emphasizing the realities associated with accessing water in South African townships he drew attention to the way that water is ultimately fetishized as a commodity and embedded in the process of uneven capitalist development, regardless of such potentially progressive policies as that in South Africa. Ilse Steyl (University of Southampton) also looked at South Africa, but presented a more legalistic and managerial analysis of policy, in this case the Water Act of 1998. She argued that this Act, which emphasizes the value of delegating management functions to local communities, is not too prescriptive and opens the way for flexible interpretations at a local level. However, it has also raised expectations about public participation in decision-making, which will be a challenge for those who manage South Africa's water resources. Ben Page (University

College London) used a case study from Nigeria to argue that there were many affinities between the strategies of the current generation of corporatised water managers and those of indirect rule in the late colonial period. Using both archive data and also information from interviews with water managers in Lagos he drew attention to the parallels in terms of the emphasis on water rate collection, the role of traditional rulers as tax collectors and a fascination in the technologies that can regulate water use. Such parallels speak not only to a re-legitimation of social bifurcation in African cities, but also more generally to the imperial character of development. Richard Taylor and Matthew Gandy (both University College London) commented on the papers from quite different perspectives and allowed enough time for a short discussion.