WHEN WATER IS SCARCE, WE SUFFER TOO: Water Scarcity through the Eyes of Children in an Urban Poor Community

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The article describes the effects of water scarcity on households in an urban poor setting, as seen through the eyes of children. Using the conceptual frame of deprivation and viewing access to water as a basic human right, it examines water deprivation as one of the indicators of poverty. Through a case study, the paper shows how water scarcity adversely affects children who are among the most vulnerable members of poor households.

Introduction

Being one of the key ingredients for survival, water is a basic human right. However, the provision of adequate and good quality water supply remains a challenge in many urban areas in the Philippines. Due to the intermittent or inadequate supply of good quality water, a large portion of the urban population resort to buying bottled water or boiling it to protect their health. Likewise, due to the lack of adequate and good quality water supply, water-borne diseases are prevalent in many urban areas that severely impact on the health of children, especially the vulnerable under-five age group.

A report stated that more than a billion people throughout the world are still without improved drinking water sources (WHO & UNICEF in SM & UNICEF, n.d., Lu, 2006). The 2006 Human Development Report shows that the water crisis is not only due to water scarcity but is also due to the combined

effects of poverty, inequality and flawed water management policies which limit water access to those with money and influence (Lu, 2006).

Like poverty reduction, access to water is one of the challenges that the Philippine government is grappling with, given the Millennium Development Goal target to "halve the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water by 2015" which the government claimed to be achievable. Specifically, the Philippine government aimed to give 92-96% of its citizens to have access to adequate water supply at an earlier date in 2010 (NEDA quoted in PIDS, 2009). The achievement of such claim remains to be seen in the coming years.

This paper describes the effects of water scarcity on urban poor households seen through the eyes of children. It is divided into four sections. The first section discusses the conceptual frame of deprivation as an indicator of poverty that is used as the framework of the study. The second part highlights the effects of lack of access to water to poorer households. The third section discusses access to water as a human right entitlement. The fourth section is a case study on the effects of water deprivation on households and children as seen from the perspective of children.

Deprivation as Indicator of Poverty

Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen has argued that poverty is measured directly by using indicators of standard of living while using income or consumption measures poverty indirectly (Gordon, Nandy, Pantazis, Pemberton & Townsend, 2003). Standard of living could be measured by deprivation indicators (high deprivation equals low standard of living); deprivation indices are accurate measures of poverty because of independence from available family income and reflect different aspects of living standards (Gordon et al., 2003).

As stated by Gordon et al., (2003), deprivation involves the deficiency of something generally considered desirable and is associated with some degree

of suffering. In conceptualizing deprivation as a continuum, the scale ranges from: mild, involving 'not having water to drink on occasion due to lack of money;' moderate, with 'no water access at home but community access is available within 200 meters or 15 minutes walk away;' severe, when the water source is 'more than 200 meters or 15 minutes walk away;' and/or unsafe, to extreme, with 'no access to water' (Gordon et al., 2003).

Gordon et al. (2003, p. 4) further argue that 'the extent of child poverty is not just dependent on family income but also on the availability of infrastructure and services.' Measuring absolute poverty among children requires the definition of threshold measures of severe deprivation of basic human needs such as food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education, information and access to services (Gordon et al., 2003).

Lack of Access to Water and its Effects

Lack of access to basic services, in particular, access to water, is often a feature of urban poor communities in the country. The scarcity or limited access to water affects the daily operations of households, especially the poorer households. Women, being primarily responsible for domestic chores, are adversely affected, as well as the children who often help in domestic chores.

Deficiency of water supply alone is not the sole cause of the global water crisis; it also stems from institutional and political systems. The Human Development Report states that people's access, especially the poor, is reduced systematically by their poverty, limited legal rights or by public policies that limit access to infrastructures. The Report also stresses the role of national governments to put more effort to install proper water infrastructure, distribute water equally, and craft policies ensuring their citizens' access to affordable safe water and sanitation (Lu, 2006).

A survey in Agusan del Sur and Dumaguete City found that adult males are mainly in charge of getting water, but adult females and both male and female

children are likewise involved, showing gender and age dimensions of water delivery (Philippine Institute for Development Studies [PIDS], 2009).

Due to lack of access to water, women and children from low-income families have to stand in line at public faucets to get water that can cost them nearly ten times the commercial rate, resulting in less money for other basic needs (Zobel de Ayala, 2006). Children are likewise affected since they help in collecting water, considering the distance of the water source. Carrying water over long distances causes injuries (specifically to necks and backs) and time spent on water collecting can affect school attendance (Gordon et al., 2003). In communities with no water source nearby, women spend 15-17 hours per week collecting water, thus affecting their time for other activities such as childcare, rest and work (Lu, 2006).

UNICEF identified inadequate and unsafe water as one of the underlying causes of child malnutrition, illness and death (SM & UNICEF, n.d.). Thirty-one percent (31%) of illnesses in the Philippines between 1994 and 2000 were traced to water-related diseases; the DOH attributed 500,000 morbidity and 4,000 mortality cases to water-related diseases (Lu, 2006). Unclean water causes more deaths than guns of wars; diarrhea alone causes the death of 1.8 million children annually (Lu, 2006), making it a main contributor to child deaths (OCHA, 2009). Thus, WHO (n.d.) recommended that improvements in child health depend on cross-sectoral collaboration which includes ensuring access to water and sanitation.

Access to water is not only a problem in urban communities, but also in many rural areas in the country. Almost 40% of households in Capiz have no access to clean water or basic sanitation facilities (SM & UNICEF, n.d.) while 57.58 % of households in barangay Almaria in Anda, Bohol are using non-potable drinking water (Local Poverty Reduction Action Plan, n.d.).

Nearly half of Philippine public elementary schools have no access to water (Monse, Naliponguit, Belizario, Benzian, & van Palenstein Helderman,

n.d.). Against this backdrop, improving access to water of the population without access to water has become one of the targets of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the Philippine government.

The Right to Water as a Human Right

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights speaks of rights to an 'adequate' standard of living and social security. The Convention on the Rights of the Child specifies the fundamental right of children to social security and an adequate standard of living. All these represent the recognition of adequate water supply as a basic human right.

According to the WHO and UNICEF, a person needs a minimum of 20 liters per day to meet his/her drinking and personal hygiene needs. If bathing and laundry needs are included, the minimum need would rise to 50 liters. Average water use per person is 200-300 liters in most European countries, 575 liters in America, less than 10 liters in Mozambique, and 40 liters in Bangladesh and Kenya (Lu, 2006).

The poor not only get less water (both in quantity and quality) but also actually pay more; people in the slums of Manila pay 5-10 times more for water per unit compared to those living in high-income areas (Lu, 2006). Since water is a prime element for survival, it is considered a basic human right for individuals to have access to water.

Effects of Water Deprivation on Children's Lives: the Case of the Permanent Housing in Balut, Tondo

History and Profile of the Permanent Housing in Brgy. 128, Balut, Tondo

The Permanent Housing is located in Brgy 128, Balut, Tondo. Once a quiet fishing village, it was later transformed into a 'mountain of garbage' when it became a garbage dumping site of Greater Manila in the 1960s until 1992,

earning the name 'Smokey Mountain.' Because of declining fish catch, scavenging from the garbage then became an alternative livelihood for the residents. Realizing that scavenging was a good opportunity, relatives of residents and other people flocked to the area. At present, almost 80% of the residents' incomes are derived from scavenging, with a daily average income of Php 200.

When the Smokey Mountain Remediation and Development Project (SMRDP) of the National Housing Authority (NHA) was approved in 1992, the area was converted into a socialized housing project. Under the project, 33 residential buildings were built which residents called the Permanent Housing. Each building has five floors, with each floor having 24 housing units measuring 32 sq. meters (Asia, Obtinario and Daep, 2007, p.24).

Prior to living in the Permanent Housing, majority of the residents were living in the Temporary Housing, a warehouse-type building that was built in 1997 under the SMRDP. The housing unit was rental-free but residents were required to pay for their water and power. Each unit has its own water and power meters. Water service was then provided by the MWSS. According to the women interviewed, since the residents had individual water meters, water supply was continuous and they even had the 'luxury' of taking a shower. To ensure monthly payments of utilities, the NHA organized the residents into an association, the Temporary Housing Water Association (THWA), that manages the collection of water fees and remittances to the NHA. In addition, the NHA provided livelihood projects for the residents. The THWA was later renamed the Smokey Mountain Community Association Inc.(SMCAI) and was registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission in 2001.

Water in the Permanent Housing under the Privatized Water Scheme of Maynilad

The water system in the area is provided by Maynilad, a private concessionaire. The SMCAI and NHA forged an agreement with Maynilad for the installation of a water system in the Permanent Housing upon payment of a Php 100,000.00 guarantee deposit. Under the Maynilad community water

scheme, a community-based association or cooperative is required to act as sub-contractor in managing the distribution, collection of fees and remittances to Maynilad. The SMCAI acted as the sub-contractor. Under this scheme, each building organized a Water Committee to take charge of collecting fees. Maynilad charged Php 42 per cubic meter but it was marked up to Php 62 by the Water Committee to cover the operational costs that include the maintenance of the water system and payment for bill collectors and other hired help.

Due to non-regularity of collection and remittances, the SMCAI incurred a debt amounting to PhP 93 million. Added to this, Maynilad also passed on to the residents the fine that amounted to PhP 2 million for an illegal line which was discovered by building officials. Water service was then terminated by Maynilad in 2006. The SMCAI renegotiated with Maynilad and came up with a new agreement. The residents were allowed to pay their loans within two years provided they post a guarantee deposit and metering charge amounting to Php 67,000. In addition, residents were required to sign a promissory note stating that they have to pay the arrears within three years. With this, Maynilad transferred the debt of SMCAI to the residents. In July 2007, the water service was restored with a different set up: the water is delivered through a hose that costs Php 2 per container (as compared to Php 1.25 in the previous set up) and water fees are collected on a daily basis. A water tender is assigned in each building to monitor the distribution of water and the collection of fees. Unfortunately, the water is not potable, with residents complaining of diarrhea and other gastro intestinal disorders. As a result, the water is no longer used for drinking.

Effects of Water Scarcity on Households and Children

Based on the focus group discussions conducted with children, the following insights were culled:

 Water is prioritized over other household needs. Considering the importance of water, households prioritize it over food and electricity. Since water supplied through the hose is unfit for drinking, families are forced to buy purified drinking water. Those with regular incomes tend to prioritize water expense over rice and electricity in their budget allocation. For those who cannot afford to buy purified water, they resort to boiling water for drinking. But some families cannot even afford to boil water, as it is an additional expense to an already "stretched-out" budget. Thus health risks are increased.

- Water availability affects women's work and lives. Since water is a primary resource in the performance of domestic chores, women who often are primarily in charge of households are tasked with water collection. The women have difficulty balancing livelihood activities and collecting water because of the erratic schedules of water rationing, making availability of water difficult to determine. To cope, some families assign water collection tasks to children.
- The burden of collecting water is shifted to children. Since adult male household members often work outside the house, the task of securing water is often left to the women and children. To ease the burden of women, children are expected to help in ensuring water for the households. In instances where women also work, securing water for the family is a task often relegated to both female and male children. In households with older children (9 to 12 years old), the chore is divided among them. However, in households with smaller children, usually the burden is shouldered by the eldest, regardless of age, as long as s/he can lift a small pail or container. Division of labor in children is also well-defined the female children secure water while the male children carry the water inside the house.
- Securing water affects the children's rest and recreation.
 Outside school activities of children include playing, reading, studying and sleeping. Because of the longer hours devoted to securing water due to the erratic schedules of water rationing,

children's playtime is shortened, if not eliminated, with time reallocated to securing water.

Stories/Experiences from the Children's Perspective

All the children interviewed do not understand the water scheme being implemented in the Permanent Housing. However, its consequences are strongly felt by the children and significantly affect their daily lives. Through a focus group discussion (FGD) in the form of drawing sessions conducted in August 2009, children were asked to recount the effects of water scarcity on them. Their accounts show the central place of water in their lives and how they manage with their family's limited access to water.

Water is central to children's lives. When asked to rank basic needs that are important to them, all the children ranked water first, followed by food and electricity. Lack of access to water has very real consequences on the lives of children, as shown in the following accounts:

We buy water at Php 2 per container. The price varies across buildings. When we have no water, I go to school without even drinking water. – Jerson, 13 years old

When there is no water in the house, I opt to buy water over food in school. - Darlene, 9 years old

I help in filling up a drum. Since the water schedule is erratic, I always fail to do my assignments. – Henrico, 12 years old

Water is really important, our mothers use them in their housework; without it, they cannot do other things. - Mary Rose, 10 years old

Without water, children will stink. -Mark, 5 years old

In my drawing, I associated no water to drought. It's scary to think that there is no water to drink. - Saskia, 12 years old

There are varying household strategies to address water scarcity and children often have to deal with the problem themselves. Conventional perspectives on children view them as passive and vulnerable individuals who are not capable of decision-making and dependent on the care-giving responsibilities of parents or guardians. However, the children in the Permanent Housing showed resiliency in the midst of difficulties brought about by water scarcity. Below are some themes that manifest the chilren's capabilities and resiliency:

Accepting and adjusting to situations of water scarcity. With the scarcity
and high cost of water, children are expected to economize and learn
how to handle and recycle water.

Water is murky during high tide; since we cannot afford to buy purified water, we boil it instead. -Shairenze, 9 years old

When fuel is limited, boiled water is reserved for our baby brother. - Albert, 7 years old

As children, we economize; water should be recycled, not wasted. - Rodolfo, 9 years old

In times that we have no money for purified water, we resort to drinking water from the hose, even if it is not safe. – siblings Mike, 9 Mika, 7 and Mark, 5 years old

We recycle water. After rinsing the clothes, we reuse it to clean the CR. - Mieka, 9 years old

We save the water we use by bathing in a big basin so it can be reused. - Henrico, 12 years old

Water used in washing dishes is reused in cleaning and watering plants. - Lourdes and Lanie, both 12 years old

children as agents and responsible members of the family. Children in poorer families are brought up to take part in the domestic chores. Parents inculcate in them the value of helping out as part of the notion of a good child. Earning the label of a good child is usually seen as social approval. Thus, a good child is a working and responsible child. Turner's & Zunz's 1993 study (as cited in Bautista, Roldan and Bacsal, 2001) noted that assigning regular household chores to children creates positive feelings in them. Accomplishing tasks assigned to them boosts their feeling of being of help to the family, thus giving them a sense of competence and worth as family members.

Some children are expected to ensure the availability of water in the family. Their responsibilities may include tending, fetching and economizing on or recycling available water. Children also learn to mobilize social networks as safety net and support in case of water shortage.

Water comes at 8am until noon. I know the schedule because it is my task to ensure we have water in the house since my parents are both working. My other tasks include cooking, taking care of my younger siblings and ensuring that they don't waste water. - Boknoy, 9 years old

When water arrives and mother is not yet home, I borrow money from our neighbor. -Maylyn, 11 years old Since water is very important, I make sure that water is not wasted by my younger siblings. - Aldrin, 11 years old

As neighbors, we help each other, if you have no water you can ask for a free ladle of water but you have to pay for the next ladle. – Raquel, 12 years old

 Wishes and dreams of a better life. Despite hardships bought about by water scarcity, the children are full of dreams, from the simplest to the most lofty. Majority of the children acknowledge that, if it were not for the lack of water, they would have more time to study and play.

I wish the water comes regularly so I can play again. – JR, 9 years old

I wish water and electricity are free of charge.- Francheska, 6 years old

If water is always available, I will use my time in sleeping, playing and studying. - Kaycee, 10 years old

I wish to finish my studies to move somewhere with enough water. – Haydee, 10 years old

When I grow up I want to be a doctor to treat people with water-related illnesses. - Angelo, 8 years old

• Creating games using water as theme. Amidst situations of difficulty and time constraints, the children are creative enough to find time and create play. Whether consciously or unconsciously, water is part of their games as illustrated in one of the children's stories:

I can only play when my mother is at home. We have a game called sili-sili. The 'IT' tags the others and say sili-sili, the one tagged then moves his/her hands up and down as if s/he ate something hot. The other players try to rescue him/her by tagging him/her saying tubig, if the 'IT' successfully tags everyone we all yell viva and the last one to yell becomes the new 'IT'. - Boknoy, 9 years old

Future Challenges and Some Ways Forward

Water scarcity affects poor people the most. But children, being the most vulnerable members of poor households are doubly hurt. Some of the burden of securing water that has been relegated traditionally to women appears to have shifted to children, as women look for work outside their abodes for additional income. Despite their difficulty in the midst of water scarcity, we can still see children's resiliency and agency. They are able to redefine their lives and creatively develop survival strategies to adapt to the situations brought about by water scarcity. Moreover, they are able to develop good dispositions and view themselves as responsible members of their respective households.

With the privatization of water, affordability becomes a problem and the right to access is put into question. From a public good, it then becomes a market commodity that is increasingly going beyond the reach of the poor, as private companies gain the freedom to hike prices without much government intervention.

Schemes devised by private water concessionaires enable them to rake in more profits. The implementation of community-managed water distribution systems in poor communities allows these companies to increase prices and gain more profits. By requiring that water be distributed, managed and maintained by communities, either through the barangay councils or community associations as co-managers or sub-contractors, private companies are able to pass some of the risks and burdens to the communities.

As seen in the case study, privatization of water distribution can have an impact on the quality of lives of children, particularly those in poor communities and households. As government frees its hand to regulate private activities, affordable and clean water drifts beyond the reach of the poor. Since it is a primary resource, its non-availability seriously affects the lives of people, especially the children.

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