



A pro-poor critique of prepayment water meters in South Africa: The Phiri story

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Lindiwe is a 39-year old single mother who lives in Phiri, one of the poorest suburbs of Soweto. Lindiwe shares her stand with twenty people; thirteen other family members in the main house - her mother, her two sisters and their ten children - and six boarders in two backyard shacks. No-one in her house is employed. Their only income comes from Lindiwe's mother's pension of R820 a month, two child support grants of R190 per month and approximately R150 a month from each of the two families renting the backyard shacks. Lindiwe's already difficult life has been rendered all but impossible since 11 October 2004, when the family finally conceded the installation of a water prepayment meter after enduring six months without any water supply at all because of their resistance to Johannesburg Water's pilot PPM project in Phiri.

Surviving close to the bread-line, Lindiwe's household has always struggled to buy food and to purchase essentials each month. Yet, prior to the PPM, each person was at least assured of sufficient water to cover basic needs. This is because, under the previous deemed consumption system, the household's water supply was never disconnected, even though Lindiwe was often unable to pay the water bills. The introduction of the PPM has withdrawn this critical safety net: now when there is no money to purchase water credit over and above the Free Basic Water (FBW) amount¹, the water supply is automatically disconnected.

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¹ In 2001 the government introduced a national Free Basic Water (FBW) policy. The policy, which gives effect to the constitutional right of access to sufficient water (section 27(1)(b) of the Constitution), has as its primary objective the provision of 6000 litres - 6 kilolitres (6kl) - of FBW each month to poor households. In the context of local government implementation, and mainly to bypass the administrative difficulties of targeting poor households, the City of Johannesburg provides every household (regardless of income or size) with 6kl FBW each month. However, because Soweto historically operated an unmetered deemed consumption water supply system, Soweto residents did not receive this 6kl FBW allocation until the introduction of PPMs in 2004. While the government's publicity campaign around

Lindiwe has lost count of the number of times her post-PPM water supply has been discontinued due to her inability to pay for water beyond the insufficient FBW allocation. She now measures time in litres: how long will the 6 kilolitres of FBW last her extended household² - ten days, twelve days, more? In her personal experience, if everyone is very careful and restricts the number of toilet flushes to one flush each per day and the number of body washes to one per person every second day, the water supply sometimes lasts until the 15th day of the month. But the standard 6kl FBW allocation is simply not enough to cover the basic water needs of twenty people and her household routinely is unable to afford the cost of additional water credit. Lindiwe's household must either sacrifice other essentials such as food, or they must restrict their water consumption in ways that compromise dignity and health. This rationing of water and/or food is particularly difficult in a household with one diabetic pensioner, three small babies and six school-going children. With a PPM, the combination of a large urban household and inability to purchase additional water credit is devastating: once the FBW supply is exhausted, the PPM automatically disconnects the water supply unless additional credit is purchased.

From unlimited water use to restricted use under the FBW/PPM regime

Prior to the installation of PPMs, Lindiwe, along with all residents of Phiri, had been supplied with unlimited water for which a flat-rate was levied.

PPM installation, as marking the advent of FBW in Soweto, is technically true in the sense that PPMs did facilitate FBW allocation, it is disingenuous for two reasons. First, other residents in Johannesburg, including those in the rich suburbs, have been receiving FBW since 2001 without having to accept PPMs. Second, although Soweto residents were previously formally charged for deemed consumption each month without a FBW allocation, in reality most residents always received at least a portion of their water supply for free by virtue of non-payment.

² FBW is allocated and dispensed per stand. This means that all people living on one stand, including tenants in backyard shacks, must share the 6kl allocation.

Crucially, households that could not afford to pay the deemed consumption charge were not disconnected from the water supply. However, non-payment did result in escalating municipal arrears, which compromised Johannesburg Water's profit margins³. For this reason, although the decision was couched in water conservation rhetoric, Johannesburg Water took the decision to begin installing PPMs in Soweto, starting with a pilot project in Phiri towards the end of 2003.⁴ To sweeten the bitter PPM pill, PPM installation was accompanied by municipal debt write-off (contingent on not tampering with the PPM) and a publicity campaign around the extension to Phiri households of 6kl FBW – as was already being provided through conventional water meters to the rich suburbs of Johannesburg.

But there has been no sweetening of the bitter effects of PPMs in Phiri, where the majority of residents are unemployed and most are unable to pay for water credit above the FBW allocation. With average households of ten or more people, many of whom are People Living With HIV/AIDS (PLWHA), the standard FBW household allocation of 6kl per household per month is insufficient to meet basic needs. In the two years since the introduction of PPMs, many Phiri residents have had to move away from their relatives, to areas without PPMs, in order to access sufficient water. Those who remain behind must make undignified choices about basic hygiene – for example, carers of PLWHA must choose between bathing their patients or washing their soiled bed sheets, and parents must choose between providing their children with body washes before they go to school or flushing the toilet.

Dr Peter Gleick, an international expert on the sufficiency of water and President of the Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment and Security in the United States of America, recommends “a basic water requirement standard for human needs” of 50 litres per capita per day

(lcd), with guaranteed access independent “of an individual's economic, social or political status”.⁵ Gleick breaks down this allocation as follows:

Minimum drinking requirement:	5l lcd
Basic requirements for sanitation ⁶ :	20l lcd
Basic requirement for bathing:	15l lcd
<u>Basic requirement for food preparation:</u>	<u>10llcd</u>
Total basic water requirement:	50l lcd

In a household of twenty people (such as Lindiwe's), the standard 6kl monthly allocation broken down into a daily amount (10lcd), is five times below Dr Gleick's recommended basic water requirement. In practice, if the household members try to make the water last for the entire month, each member of the household can only flush the toilet every second day or have a body wash once every four days, leaving no water for drinking, cooking, clothes washing etc. Even with half the number of household members, the FBW allocation – 20lcd – is less than half the total basic water requirement. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), access to water of below 20lcd carries with it a “high level of health concern” and is insufficient to cover “laundry/bathing unless carried out at source”.⁷

For the many large households in Phiri who exhaust their FBW supply before the end of the month and are too poor to afford additional water credit, the ultimate punishment is the PPM's automatic and immediate disconnection. Unlike conventional meters in rich suburbs, which provide reasonable warning of a proposed disconnection and an opportunity to make representation (in the form of notification in red writing at the bottom of the monthly bill that the account is in arrears), PPM disconnection occurs automatically and without warning following the exhaustion of the FBW supply. As a consequence, households are often taken by surprise. If the disconnection occurs during the night or over a weekend when water credit

³ Johannesburg Water, although a public company wholly owned by the City of Johannesburg, operates as a ring-fenced corporation.

⁴ This article does not deal with the issue of water conservation which, although important, has been used as a smokescreen for the introduction of PPM technology, which is primarily a cost-recovery mechanism. It remains the case in Johannesburg (and most municipalities) that regardless of income, all households receive 6kl FBW each month and extravagant consumption of water is not restricted, as long as it is paid for.

⁵ Peter Gleick, “Basic Water Requirements for Human Activities: Meeting Basic Needs”, *Water International* 21 (1996), 83.

⁶ In fact, for in-house sanitation Gleick recommends as much as 50-75lcd just for sanitation. This is because conventional high-volume flush sewerage systems such as exist in Phiri consume approximately 14 litres of water for each toilet flush.

⁷ Guy Howard & Jamie Bartram “Domestic water quantity, service level and health”. WHO, Geneva, 2003. Available at: http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/diseases/wsh0302/en/index.html.

vendors are closed, the household has to go without water until the shops are open again. If the household does not have money for additional water, it must borrow either money or water from neighbours in order to survive. The continuous infringements to dignity and health are clear. Even more seriously, a direct risk to life is posed in the event of a fire. This has been tragically demonstrated in Phiri, where a fire that broke out in a backyard shack resulted in two small children being burnt to death because, following the installation of a PPM, there was insufficient water available to extinguish the fire.

The Phiri water rights case

Responding to the multiple violations posed by PPMs in Phiri, in July 2006 an application was launched in the Johannesburg High Court by five applicants, on behalf of themselves, their households and all residents of Phiri who are in a similar position to the applicants, as well as everyone in the public interest. The application, which is supported by the Coalition Against Water Privatisation and is defended by the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALs), seeks to have PPMs declared unlawful and it asks the Court to order Johannesburg Water to provide everyone in Phiri with a FBW supply of 50lcd and the option of a conventional meter at the cost of the City of Johannesburg. The respondents – the City of Johannesburg, Johannesburg Water and the Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry – have filed their answering affidavits and the applicants will file their replying affidavit by the end of May. The case is likely to be heard in the Johannesburg High Court towards the end of 2007. The applicants and their supporting organisations believe that the case will be critical to securing the constitutionally-guaranteed rights of poor people to dignity, healthcare and sufficient water.