

ZIMCODD Statement on Prepaid Water Meters



Investing In People for Social & Economic Justice

Introduction

Harare and Bulawayo city councils have reiterated that the installations of pre paid water meters will go ahead despite residents' objections to the proposal. A number of articles have been published, discussing the advantages and disadvantages of pre-paid water meters. The Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development (ZIMCODD) as a social and economic justice movement, strongly disapproves and is against the installation of prepaid water meters. This position is buttressed by provisions in the Constitution and the objectives of the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Social and Economic Transformation (ZIMASSET), which is the current national economic blueprint. ZIMCODD views the installation of prepaid water meters as unconstitutional, unjust and a derailing factor on the aspirations of ZIMASSET. This statement is meant to reiterate 11 points against the installation of pre-paid water meters as guided by Food and water watch organization¹.

Social Service Delivery in the Constitution

ZIMCODD commends the people of Zimbabwe for coming up with a Constitution that has provisions for social service delivery. Chapter 4 of the Constitution focuses on the Declaration of Rights. Section 77 of this chapter states that, ***“Every person has the right to safe, clean and portable water....and the State must take reasonable legislative and other measures....to achieve the progressive realisation of this right”***. This provision clearly shows that water is indispensable and as right, needs to be enjoyed by every Zimbabwean regardless of social or economic status. In light of this, the installation of prepaid water meters is unconstitutional as it deprives those citizens who fail to pay from enjoying their constitutional right without hindrance. Prepaid water meters ensure that access to water is only guaranteed to those who have the ability to pay. This is tantamount to privatisation and commodification of water.

Proponents for pre-paid water meters argue that they promote efficiency in revenue collection for the city councils. This shows that the local authorities are prioritising revenue collection at the expense of service delivery. Failure to pay outstanding water bills results in water cuts which is unconstitutional (in terms of Section 44 and 77) according to a court judgment by Justice Bhunu of April 2014². The Bulawayo City Council (BCC) in 2015 resumed water disconnections, stating that it is the only way to collect outstanding money from residents which stands at US\$90million³. The same is taking place in Harare defying the court ruling against water disconnections.

ZIMCODD urges the government to ensure that every citizen of Zimbabwe enjoys the right to water. Zimbabwe is endowed with a lot of natural resources that if properly managed can provide potential

¹ <http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/images/water/world-water/right/prepaid/PrePaidWaterReasons.pdf>

² <http://www.herald.co.zw/water-disconnections-unconstitutional-court/>

³ <http://www.bulawayo24.com/index-id-news-sc-local-byo-61473.html> (BCC intensifies water disconnections, 24 January 2015)

resources for the provision of affordable, adequate water. To complement this, the government should be committed to curb illicit financial flows so that potential resources can be realized. Proceeds from mineral resources should be channeled towards the provision of safe, clean, and potable water, as enshrined in the Constitution.

ZIMASSET and Social Service Delivery

In line with the Constitution, the current economic blueprint, the ZIMASSET, has a social services and poverty eradication cluster which also addresses water issues. This cluster focuses on ensuring the provision of social and economic rights to Zimbabwean citizens by the government. The government commits its self to improving access to water in order to enhance the standard of living of citizens for the development of the country⁴.

Instead of carrying the cost of services as a society, “NEOLIBERAL TOWN COUNCILS” are focused on privatising and individualising the cost of water, and ignoring the ability to pay. Privatised water utilities in particular are choosing prepaid water meters as an easy way to avoid obligations previously considered mandatory for water providers. Prepaid water meters are not a choice of the poor in need of improved water services, but a choice of corporate water multinationals and bureaucrats far removed from reality.

In light of the above, ZIMCODD wishes to reiterate its position on prepaid water meters through the 11 points given below:

1. Prepaid Water Meters Pave the Way for Privatisation

The World Bank states that prepaid meters can "facilitate cost-recovery and accelerate private sector participation in provision of water services". Cost-recovery and privatisation are key conditions in World Bank lending policies that continue to undermine access and affordability of clean water for all and promote the increased involvement of large water corporations. Prepaid water meters are also a tool used under private contract in order to secure profits for the shareholders, not the access to water for the users.

2. Prepaid Water Meters Perverts Demand Management

Prepaid water meters facilitate effective demand management in a very cruel manner: when one cannot afford the charge, he/she is simply cut off. Studies have shown that prepaid water meters have reduced the demand of water by up to 65%, leaving poor consumers with the bare minimum of water for their daily consumption because they cannot afford the water they need. The use of prepaid water meters has resulted in outbreaks of cholera due to use of polluted water.

3. Prepaid Water Meters Remove Procedural Protections and Consumer Safeguards

Prepaid water meters fundamentally change the social relationship households have traditionally had with water providers. They remove all safeguards for the consumer. The relationship between the consumer and the water provider is limited as the service provider is not available for any negotiations regarding faulty billing and disconnections. Households are forced to self-disconnect when they run out of water because there is no dispute mechanism in place to challenge the cut off procedure.

⁴ ZIMASSET, page 63

4. Prepaid Water Meters Exacerbate Emergencies

In the event of fire a lot of water is needed to put it out – but with prepaid water meters households are likely to find themselves cut off when extinguishing the fire. The prepaid water meter does not understand emergencies. With no fire hydrants, if fire occurs at night one is unable to buy additional credits for water.

5. Prepaid Water Meters Undermine Public Health

Prepaid meters force households to reduce their consumption of water and to make difficult trade-offs between food, medicines, school fees, transportation and other essential goods and services and the consumption of water. As a result, families survive on less than the World Health Organization recommended minimum water consumption for life of at least 25 litres of water per day for basic survival (100 liters per day is needed to sustain human development). A lower consumption of water severely limits the ability of development and creates an undignified situation for the poor. In the United Kingdom, prepaid water meters were associated with an increase in dysentery when families' self- disconnected after being unable to pay for service. In South Africa, in KwaZulu Natal 113,966 people were infected with cholera after prepaid water meters replaced communal standpipes. The increased use of prepaid water meters undermines the health gains sought through the improved delivery of and access to clean water.

6. Prepaid Water Meters are More Expensive

Despite potential management savings prepaid water meters are provided at a higher rate for users as compared to a traditional billing system. Prepaid water meters are sold as a high-tech solution and come at a higher price than any other meter. In the Global South, the majority of people live on less than U.S.\$2 a day, paying up to 50% of that in water fees. Families have to choose **between water and other necessities for survival and life with dignity.**

7. Prepaid Water Meters Increase Conflicts in our Communities

Communities traditionally share the burden of providing access to water for all. With the implementation of prepaid water meters, water becomes an individualized marketed commodity and social relations in the communities erode when families run out of water. In desperate need, families 'steal' water from each other when they are unable to buy the water they need for basic survival.

8. Prepaid Water Meters Magnifies Inequality

Prepaid water meters are promoted in poor areas in order to secure payments from families who have difficulties paying under ordinary circumstances. Prepaid water meters are not promoted in areas where the affluent live or on government and companies premises. Since government owes a huge chunk of local authorities' debt, how will council ensure government and companies compliance?

9. Prepaid Water Meters Violate the Right to Water

The human right to water has been recognized in the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Prepaid water meters abuse the core of this international treaty by denying access to clean water to those in most need. Instead, prepaid water meters force poor families to use unsafe water sources once they lose their ability to pay.

10. Prepaid Water Meters Exacerbates Gender Inequality

When families find themselves unable to pay for prepaid water services, they are forced to use alternative sources of water. That forces women and children backward into the traditional role as

water carriers and undermines educational and gender equality gains that can be reached through simple improvements in water supply.

11. Prepaid Water Meters Abuse Willingness to Pay against Ability to Pay

World Bank and private companies justify prepaid water meters and state that even poor households are willing to pay increasing tariffs for access to clean water. In addition to addressing the wrong problem, prepaid water meters do not make access to water cheaper for the poor. This argument does not support the fact that all human beings need water for basic survival. Instead, these decision makers must start analyzing the ability to pay. Households should not be forced to give up food in order to buy water.

ZIMCODD therefore calls for:

- A stop on the installation of prepaid water meters
- The mobilisation and utilisation of our national resources to achieve the universal access to water.
- More dialogue between local authorities and the public on the prepaid water meters issue.
- A transparent cost benefit analysis report from councils on how much it would cost to contract a company for the installation of prepaid the water meters in comparison to fixing shortcomings in the current billing system.

Our Resources, Our Future- Water is not a Sale it is a Right!

About ZIMCODD

The Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development (ZIMCODD), is a non-profit Social and Economic Justice coalition established in February 2000 to facilitate citizens' involvement in making public policy and practice pro people and sustainable. ZIMCODD views indebtedness, the unfair local and global trade regime and lack of democratic people-centered social economic and political governance as root causes of the socio-economic crises in Zimbabwe and the world at large. Drawing from community-based livelihood experiences of its membership, ZIMCODD implements programmes targeted at :

- Educating the citizen
- Facilitating policy dialogue among stakeholders
- Engaging and acting on socio-economic governance at local, regional and global levels.

Our vision

Sustainable socio-economic justice in Zimbabwe through a vibrant people based movement

Mission

To take action in redressing the Debt burden, Social and Economic Injustices through formulation and promotion of alternative policies to the neo-liberal agenda

Objectives

- To raise the level of economic literacy among ZIMCODD members and citizens to include views and participation of grassroots and marginalised communities.
- To facilitate research, lobbying and advocacy in order to raise the level of economic literacy on issues of debt, trade and sustainable development.
- To formulate credible and sustainable economic and social policy alternatives.
- To develop a national coalition and facilitate the building of a vibrant movement for social and economic justice.

For more information, please contact:

*Mr. Joy Mabenge: National Chairperson: +263772904479, Email:
jmabenge@yahoo.com*

*Ms. Patricia Kasiamhuru: Executive Director: +263773213770, Email:
patriciak@zimcodd.co.zw*

Contact ZIMCODD Head Office:

226 Samora Machel Avenue, Eastlea, Harare Tel: +263-4-776830

Website: www.zimcodd.org.zw

*Facebook Page: Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development, Profile: Zimcodd
Zimcodd*

Twitter: ZIMCODD1