

Prepaid Water Meters in Mutare, Zimbabwe: A Critical Analysis of Rights, Access, and Neoliberal Urbanism



Zimbabwe's urban centers are facing a confluence of challenges, including aging infrastructure, inadequate water supply, and increasing socio-economic disparities. Mutare, a city in the Eastern Highlands, exemplifies these challenges. The city's water infrastructure is characterized by persistent leaks, frequent breakdowns, and insufficient capacity to meet the growing demands of its population (Mutare City Council, 2023). In February 2024, the Mutare City Council initiated a pilot project to install prepaid water meters, aligning with a broader nationwide policy initiative to implement 600,000 prepaid units (Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Water, Climate and Rural Resettlement, 2022). This initiative, framed as a means of improving revenue collection and promoting water conservation, raises critical questions about the equity, accessibility, and sustainability of water governance in the city. This article critically examines this development, analyzing its potential implications for the constitutional right to water, and situating it within the context of broader neoliberal urban policies.

Section 77 of the Zimbabwean Constitution guarantees every citizen the right to safe, clean, and potable water. (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013). International legal frameworks, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, also recognize access to water as a human right. Despite these legal guarantees, the introduction of prepaid water meters effectively transforms water into a commodity, subject to market forces and individual purchasing power. This commodification raises fundamental concerns about access for low-income households, unemployed individuals, and vulnerable populations who may struggle to afford the upfront costs associated with prepaid systems (Bakker, 2003). The potential for disconnection due to inability to pay directly contradicts the principle of non-discrimination enshrined in human rights law, potentially creating a two-tiered system where access to water is determined by socio-economic status.

The implementation of prepaid water meters in Mutare can be viewed as part of a broader trend towards neoliberal urbanism, characterized by the privatization of public services, the emphasis on cost recovery, and the increasing involvement of market mechanisms in urban governance (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). This approach often prioritizes economic efficiency over social equity, leading to the marginalization of vulnerable populations and the erosion of public accountability (Swyngedouw, 2005). The focus on revenue generation through prepaid meters may overshadow the need for comprehensive infrastructure

investment and sustainable water management practices, potentially exacerbating the long-term water crisis in Mutare. Furthermore, the involvement of private companies in the installation and management of prepaid meters raises concerns about transparency and accountability, as profit motives may conflict with the public interest.

A significant critique of the prepaid meter initiative is the perceived lack of meaningful community consultation in the decision-making process. Residents and local stakeholders have reported limited opportunities to voice their concerns and contribute to the design of the program (Nyatsanza, 2024). This absence of participatory governance not only undermines democratic principles but also risks implementing solutions that are ill-suited to the specific needs and circumstances of the community. Effective and sustainable water governance requires inclusive decision-making processes that involve all stakeholders, including residents, local authorities, civil society organizations, and water experts (Castro, 2007).

5. Alternative Approaches to Sustainable Water Governance:

Instead of relying solely on prepaid meters, the Mutare City Council should explore alternative approaches to sustainable water governance that prioritize both revenue generation and equitable access. These approaches could include:

- **Progressive tariffs:** Imposing higher tariffs on high-volume water users while providing subsidized rates for low-income households.
- **Investing in infrastructure maintenance and rehabilitation:** Addressing the root causes of water loss and improving the efficiency of the water distribution network.
- **Promoting water conservation through public awareness campaigns:** Educating residents about water-saving techniques and promoting responsible water usage.
- **Strengthening community participation in water management:** Empowering residents to participate in the planning, monitoring, and evaluation of water services.
- **Exploring alternative financing mechanisms:** Seeking grants and loans from international organizations and development partners to support water infrastructure projects.

The introduction of prepaid water meters in Mutare represents a significant shift in water governance, with potentially far-reaching consequences for the city's residents. While the initiative is presented as a solution to improve revenue collection and promote water conservation, it risks exacerbating existing inequalities and undermining the fundamental right to water. A critical analysis reveals that the program aligns with a broader trend towards neoliberal urbanism, characterized by the commodification of public services and the prioritization of economic efficiency over social equity. To ensure equitable and sustainable water governance, the Mutare City Council should prioritize community participation, invest in infrastructure development, and explore alternative approaches that guarantee access to water for all residents, regardless of their socio-economic status. Further research is needed to assess the long-term impacts of prepaid water meters on water access, affordability, and health outcomes in Mutare.