Chapter 23

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THE PARADOX OF FREE URBAN WATER: BURKINA FASO'S FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19

As soon as the first cases of Covid-19 were reported in Burkina Faso, the national government drew up a Response Plan, which, among other measures, made water free at standpipes and for "social tariff" recipients in urban areas. The government assessed the financing needs of running this program and solicited donor assistance. This chapter analyzes the consequences of these measures on the public water operator, l'Office national de l'eau et de l'assainissement (ONEA), which plans to ensure the supply of drinking water to as many urban households as possible by 2030. We also report on a survey conducted in Bissighin – an "irregular" neighborhood of the capital city, Ouagadougou – which documents how households have (or have not) appropriated these measures and the strategies they have developed to ensure their water supply in the context of the pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed structural inadequacies in essential services in Africa (JMP 2019). It has also served as a reminder that access to water remains a crucial issue, particularly in

the major cities of West Africa where there have been a significant number of reported cases of Covid-19. Indeed, compliance with prevention recommendations presupposes the availability of safe water to ensure hygiene, hand washing and, more generally, the health of the population.

In this chapter, we analyze the institutional responses in Burkina Faso to the Covid-19 health crisis. Burkina Faso was one of the first countries in West Africa to be hit by the pandemic. As of August 25, 2020, there were 1,338 confirmed cases, 1,034 recoveries and 55 deaths (Johns Hopkins University & Medicine 2020). Burkina Faso also stands out for the responsiveness of the state with the development of a fully costed national strategy – the Response Plan – and the introduction of exceptional measures in the urban water sector, with some water services being made free over a period of three months (April to June 2020).

We also studied the impact of these measures on households living in Bissighin, a precarious, irregular[1] neighborhood of Ouagadougou (the country's capital), which has limited access to water. The research documents the coping strategies of households in the context of the health crisis and the changes in their water consumption habits given the fact that water is free.

We discuss the choices made by the Burkinabe state and the public water company, l'Office national de l'eau et de l'assainissement (ONEA), in partnership with donors, to favour universal free water measures without targeting poor households or irregular areas. We ask whether this policy reinforces the inequalities that already exist, particularly between urban and rural areas and between households, and how these policies impact the strategy and finances of ONEA. Specifically, we want to know if this policy will slow down

[1] We use the term "irregular" instead of "informal" to describe what local actors in Burkina Faso refer to as unplanned neighborhoods ("*quartiers non lotis*") (Deboulet 2016), many of which have limited formal services. In 2017, only 74% of Burkina Faso's inhabitants had access to improved water sources (92% in urban areas and 66% in rural areas [JMP 2019]).

network extension projects in the future.

Our research team conducted semi-structured interviews, carried out in June and July 2020 with representatives from ONEA (Secretary General and Customer Service Management), donors (Agence Française de Développement, GIZ) and the Burkinabe Red Cross. Interviews were also conducted in Bissighin: 24 households; two managers of standpipes; a representative of a privately run mini-water network (ACMG); managers of a private school and a public school; a nurse from the health and social promotion center; and members of the Bissighin neighbourhood committee. The analysis of various reports and press articles provided additional information gathered during our investigations.

THE RESPONSE PLAN

Since March 9, 2020, when the first cases of Covid-19 were confirmed, the Burkinabe state has taken several restrictive measures: closing national borders, quarantining cities affected by the pandemic, and closing schools, markets and public transport. In a speech addressed to the nation on April 2, 2020, the president of Burkina Faso also unveiled a response plan to fight the pandemic that was accompanied by several social measures to relieve the population, the private sector and the informal sector.

Given the recommended prevention measures (e.g. hand washing and social distancing) and hygiene rules, water appeared to be an essential contingent in the plan. But how can one protect oneself against the virus when one has limited access to water and lives in a densely populated neighbourhood?

Three measures were therefore taken to ensure “free water” for three months (April, May and June 2020). During this time, the state covered the cost of the “social block” in the water bills of all urban households with access to private connections and suspended

charges for water provided at standpipes.[2] In addition, penalties for late payment of bills were cancelled over the same period. Donors recommended that these measures be only for a limited time so as not to have too great an impact on public finances. According to the Secretary General (SG) of ONEA, the three-month period chosen is not linked to financial criteria, but to health information that predicted the peak of the pandemic in April 2020. It was therefore necessary to support the populations whose economic activity was going to be reduced and who would face difficulties affording essential services such as water.

In an interview, the ONEA SG explained the political process that led to the adoption of these measures. The Ministry of Economy and Finance contacted ONEA for an evaluation of the cost of making water completely free for all Burkinabé households. However, given the numbers involved, the ministry then asked ONEA to evaluate the cost of free water for the social block, water at standpipes in towns and markets, and the cancellation of late payment penalties. From then on, "everything was decided very quickly, a week having elapsed between the two estimates and the decision taken in March 2020" (SG ONEA).

According to ONEA's SG, the speed at which decisions needed to be made justified the fact that the mayors of cities, who are responsible for the management of water services, were not consulted in the process. Similarly, the union representing ONEA workers, user associations and civil society organizations were not involved in the consultation. Finally, the assessment of household needs, based on their location and socio-economic situation, was not carried out upstream. Thus, in this emergency context, a hierarchical management of the crisis was favoured.

[2] Burkina Faso has adopted a tariff grid with four blocks for urban households ("large houses," industries and public administration offices are under one tariff). The social block corresponds to a water consumption of 8 m3/month at a rate of 188 FCFA/m3 (for a production cost of 400 FCFA/m3; 1 USD = 554 FCFA). The price of water at the standpipe is normally 188 FCFA/m3.

The Response Plan served as a basis for discussion with the donor organizations supporting Burkina Faso (World Bank, European Union, KFW and GIZ, Danida and Agence Française de Développement), which were asked to finance these measures. In an interview, a representative from the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) underscored "the great responsiveness of the Burkinabe State with precise figures and a time frame." Good coordination between certain donors through meetings on different platforms made it possible to target aid more effectively. The AFD financed free water at standpipes through specific budget support in the form of a state subsidy to ONEA. This aid was released very quickly. Other donors did not adopt the same targeted strategy. According to the ONEA SG, "no donor has positioned itself to provide financial support to the social block." The World Bank is going to strengthen its cash position, but this debt will have to be repaid. German cooperation via KfW and GIZ contributed to the Response Plan by providing personal protective equipment (hand sanitizer, soap and masks), notably within the framework of the Water Supply and Sanitation Program partially financed by GIZ.

"FREE" WATER: IMPACTS ON ONEA

ONEA is a public operator that ensures the production, treatment and distribution of drinking water in the main cities of Burkina Faso (Baron 2014). It supplies neighbourhoods with water from private connections and standpipes (standpipes being considered as part of a social policy). Irregular neighbourhoods are normally outside its scope of intervention since they are characterized by an absence of formal property titles and land registry, and there are difficulties in laying the network and collecting bills.

The measures taken to deal with the health crisis could weaken ONEA, which in recent years has faced major challenges related to changes in governance and has also set a target to increase the

population receiving water services by 2030.[3] Free water for three months could mean not only less revenue for ONEA, but additional costs.

A standpipe manager is paid for volume of water sold. Normally, a standpipe operator would pay ONEA 198 FCFA[4] per m3 sold, which gives them a profit of 102 FCFA/m3. With the free meter-reading measure introduced by the Response Plan, ONEA has committed to remunerating the water attendant based on an estimate and has rounded up the water attendant's compensation to 150 FCFA per cubic metre sold. There were delays in implementing the scheme, and some standpipe managers were afraid of not being compensated, which led to initial misunderstandings. ONEA also pays for the water distributed to consumers at the standpipes, with no upper limit. Finally, ONEA recruited controllers to verify that the rule of free water was respected at the standpipes.

If we consider free water for the social block, initial estimates show that users tended to "turn off the tap at home" once the 8 m3 of the social block had been consumed to make use of the free water at the standpipes. Thus, according to ONEA's SG, the free water measures are "not interesting for ONEA if you only consider the financial point of view, and the difference between the cost of water production and the selling price per m3 shows a significant loss for the ONEA."[5]

ONEA makes the advance payment and invoices the state every month for the loss of income on the basis of actual consumption at the standpipes and private connections. Thus, in principle, the health crisis should not impact ONEA's financial equilibrium. However, according to its general secretariat, delays in repayment by

[3] In the National Program (PN-AEPA 2015-2030), the population served by ONEA is expected to grow from 3.5 million in 2015 to more than 8 million in 2030.

[4] 1 USD = 554 FCFA.

[5] For three months, it has been estimated that the social bracket costs €5 million; free access to standpipes (about 3,500 in the country, including 1,500 in Ouagadougou), €3.5 million; and the cancellation of penalties amounts to €0.63 million.

the state could weaken ONEA in a context where ONEA's debt ratio is already high. In addition, some ministries and companies have been late in paying their bills. Despite these constraints, ONEA is not considering layoffs, unlike in other African countries where water management is a private sector activity.[6]

Moreover, donors have recommended from the outset that the duration of these free measures be limited to a short period of time. Extending this form of aid beyond this period would weaken the company's financial situation. Nevertheless, the social consequences should also be taken into account. Indeed, household budgets are likely to be significantly reduced in the coming months as a result of the economic crisis. The share of water as a percentage of household spending could encroach on other items, such as food. The risks of a food crisis in the sub-region, aggravated by the Covid-19 crisis, therefore cannot be considered independently of a policy to support access to essential services, such as water.

Finally, the health crisis has had an impact at the operational level. ONEA had planned investments to maintain the network and expenditures for connection equipment, water treatment products, etc. However, as most orders could not be met, ONEA adopted a strategy of diversifying its suppliers, some of which have higher costs.

"FREE" WATER: EXACERBATING OR REDUCING INEQUALITIES?

The measures relating to free water concern the entire urban population rather than the most vulnerable. Admittedly, while targeting is complex to set up (Hydroconseil 2019), it is useful in reducing inequalities. For instance, the so-called social connection policy means that ONEA subsidizes the connection to the network for all urban households, regardless of their socio-economic status. How-

[6] GWOPA, UN Habitat and GIZ. 2020. "There's a hole in my bucket!" Webinar Series: Utilities Fight Covid-19. August 11.

ever, this usually involves having to pay a monthly water bill, which is not possible for poor households that do not have regular income. As a result, many households do not have access to tap water at home. Vulnerable populations who are engaged in small-scale, irregular economic activities in the informal sector cannot be included in this system as they do not have regular income every month (Baron et al. 2016). While some donors have debated the merits of a scheme that benefits the relatively better-off, the state and ONEA have not discussed this point. However, the ONEA general secretariat emphasizes that "large houses," industries and government agencies do not qualify for the social tariff. Finally, households living in extremely precarious conditions (displaced,[7] isolated, or which include people with disabilities) saw their situation worsen during the crisis and need more specific support.

Although the spread of Covid-19 is probably greater in densely populated cities (OECD 2020), rural areas have not benefited from these free water measures. Donors put forward two arguments regarding the choice to focus only on the urban: water governance in rural areas is more complex (involving municipalities and private operators), and technical systems are more diverse (boreholes, human-powered pumps). Rural populations complain, however, that they pay more for water than city dwellers; the measures to provide free urban water will exacerbate these inequalities.

COPING STRATEGIES IN BISSIGHIN, OUAGADOUGOU

The free water measures taken by the government and implemented by the ONEA target both formal and irregular neighborhoods. However, the irregular areas where precarious populations reside present specific difficulties. In the context of the Covid-19 crisis,

[7] The OECD (2020) warns of the extremely precarious situation of displaced people in Burkina Faso. There were 22,000 internally displaced people in July 2018, and 500,000 in early 2020.

households in these areas noticed water cuts or low water flow – common at that time, but exacerbated by high demand. Long queues now form at standpipes, but curfews must be respected. An IRC study (2020) concluded that: "Blue Gold [water] is therefore free but unavailable due to the discontinuity of service. How can a population regularly wash their hands with water they do not have?"

To document this unprecedented situation, we investigated the neighbourhood of Bissighin, where no cases of Covid-19 had been reported by the end of June 2020. Bissighin is an old village, engulfed by urbanization, northeast of Ouagadougou, with a population of about 30,000 inhabitants in 2017 (Guigma 2017). The neighborhood grew rapidly in 2020, following the arrival of displaced persons from conflict-affected areas in the Sahel region. In principle, the lack of a formal title deed excludes the neighborhood from access to the ONEA centralized water network.

However, a project initiated in 2009, financed by the AFD and the World Bank, made it possible to provide certain irregular neighbourhoods, including Bissighin, with a mini decentralized network (Baron et al. 2016). This network is managed by a private delegate (private operator), which was selected following a call for tenders and which signed a leasing contract with ONEA. In Bissighin the company is called ACMG. ONEA sells water wholesale to the delegate, and provides it with network connection equipment free of charge. This mini-network supplies both standpipes and private connections at home for households that can pay a monthly water bill. According to ACMG, there are 2,020 subscribers via individual connections and 18 standpipes in Bissighin (June 2020). ACMG charges the same rates as ONEA based upon the principle of equality with respect to water services. However, during Covid-19, some residents complained about the higher rates charged by the delegates – a point of tension with the ONEA that was discussed at a meeting in August 2020 (Lefaso 2020).

This project has had some success, and the demand for individual connections is increasing. But not everyone can get access due

to the lack of connection material provided by ONEA. This problem of supplies is recurrent, but the Covid-19 crisis has made it worse. According to ACMG, "we have just received, 3 days ago, 200 connection kits out of 508 requests." This was discussed during a meeting between ONEA and the delegates.

Our field survey highlighted the consequences of the measures taken in the water sector on the living conditions of Bissighin households. The following aspects will be discussed: the consequences on the quantity of water consumed by households; the effects of "free" water on household behavior; and adaptive strategies to deal with the health crisis.

A significant increase in water consumption

The pandemic has had a direct impact on the volumes of water consumed because preventative actions require large quantities of water. ONEA's customer service manager estimates that water consumption rates increased 25% from April to June compared to the same period last year. This corresponds to the dry season, with high temperatures and recurring water cuts. However, the inhabitants of Bissighin specified that, faced with low water flow and frequent water cuts, they have resorted to drilling wells where water is permanently available. The representative from ACMG also commented that water pressure was low.

Access to drinking water differs depending on the location of households in the neighborhood. The difficulties usually faced by the most vulnerable households were exacerbated by frequent hand washing. These households, far from the standpipes, continued to rely on wells for water. Some have even built new wells that do not guarantee the quality of water for drinking.

Two thirds of the heads of households surveyed in Bissighin say that their daily water consumption has increased since April 2020 by more than 25%. This can be explained by the frequency of doing laundry, washing dishes and washing hands. One head of household explained it this way:

> Here is what has changed in our habits. We no longer use the same water twice to rinse our plates; we throw away the water from the first rinse. In addition, we rinse the same plates twice, so we use more water. We no longer eat from the same dish. We no longer drink water with several people from the same cup, and if the water remains in the cup, we throw it away. We wash our clothes more frequently. We don't wear the same clothes several times before washing them. We also wash our masks. To wash ourselves, we don't use the same buckets with several people. Each person has their own bucket. (Personal communication, not dated.)

Other households installed handwashing facilities in their yards.

> We have placed a wash-hand [sic] basin at the entrance of the courtyard for anyone who enters to wash their hands.…Before the coronavirus, I washed my hands three times a day, but since the coronavirus, I wash my hands about nine times a day. (Personal communication, not dated)

These new habits have had an impact on the sources and means of water supply and storage.

New behaviors at standpipes

Free water at standpipes has led to large crowds with long lines of people waiting to fill buckets with water. This problem was aggravated by low water pressure at the standpipe, which is recurrent during the dry season. It has also affected the water consumption of households with individual connections and those far from modern water points.

According to the ACMG delegate in Bissighin, since the announcement of free water at the standpipes, the flow rate has decreased because most households with an individual connection, as well as the standpipe operators, have opened their water points

from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. without a break. The water bill doubled in April because there was a lot of waste, although he noted "there was a reduction in waste in May and June." Some households had large water bills because they thought that free water applied to all their consumption, not realizing that only the first 8m3 – the social block – was free.

According to one manager of a standpipe:

> We were forced to prohibit fetching water with containers other than jerry cans and buckets because children would come to fill bowls with water, pour water over their bodies for fun and come back for more.

According to ONEA's customer manager, instructions have been given to standpipe managers to allow only one can to be filled per person. The aim was to prevent certain customers from "monopolizing" the standpipe. However, this measure does not seem to have been respected: some standpipe managers allowed "tricycle" drivers to fill about thirty 20-litre cans at a time (see Figure 23.1).

Figure 23.1
Filling 20-litre cans of water with a tricycle.

Source: Guigma, Bissighin (June 19, 2020).

Figure 23.2

Diversity of water transportation.

Source: Guigma, Bissighin (June 19, 2020).

In order to be able to store the maximum amount of water at home and avoid multiple round trips between the home and the standpipe, several solutions are being tested by households to transport the maximum amount of water on foot, with a rickshaw or by bicycle (see Figure 23.2, above). Residents compete with each other in ingenuity. A bicycle can easily carry three to four 20-litre cans. The record, according to the manager of one standpipe, is six 20-litre cans on one bicycle.

Most of the households surveyed confirm that water is free at the standpipe. However, according to ONEA's customer service manager, at the very beginning of the measure's application, not all standpipes were free of charge because some standpipe managers thought they would not be compensated. Compensation is supposed to take place every two weeks, but since there were delays at the beginning, they continued to sell water to their customers. ONEA's customer service manager says that "now it's all been sorted out." In addition, a unit led by ONEA's customer service department has been set up to monitor and discipline those who do not respect the measure of free water, which could result in a breach of contract between the delegate and the standpipe manager. In Ouagadougou, 15 people have been specially recruited to monitor the standpipes even in irregular settlements. To date, no contract has

been cancelled.

Nevertheless, some heads of households claim that water has never been free at the standpipe. A standpipe manager in Bissighin reported:

> Water is free, but some customers support us by paying something: half-price for example.... Before COVID, we had monthly subscribers; some continue to pay monthly for their water consumption. It is the free service that has created the problem of water availability because payments are irregular on the part of the delegate. [In irregular neighbourhoods, the contract is between the delegate and the standpipe manager.]

Indeed, some households claim that some standpipe managers took advantage of the general water shortage to serve water primarily to customers who were willing to pay, promising to provide free water to others when the flow at the standpipe was better. These situations generated tensions around the standpipes and impede compliance with physical distancing (Kinda 2020).

Solidarity behaviors have also emerged. Given the high number of people using standpipes due to free water, households with private connections have authorized neighbors to come and take water for free at their homes. Donations of water are usually infrequent in the capital (Baron et al. 2016).

New constraints for precarious households

Precarious households in Bissighin have experienced a slowdown in their informal economic activities, resulting in new constraints to pay for water. However, residents who live far from the standpipes and are unable to pay a monthly bill have to solicit informal water vendors and thus pay for the transport of water to their homes (Kjellén and McGranahan 2006). The cost of water is consequently higher for these households. According to ONEA, the state has taken over the water supply service but not the transport of water

to households far from a modern water access point. The role of these informal water resellers has therefore not been considered in the measures taken by the state. The delegate confirms ONEA's statements: "For those who are far from the standpipes, the water remains free even if they have to pay for the transport; they can always come and fetch the water for free themselves, at the standpipe."

Rationality in water use and daily expenses

In view of the increased need for water and the limited financial resources following restrictive measures to reduce travel and the closure of markets, 7 out of 10 households that we surveyed opted to rationalize their daily expenses in general, and water in particular.

Although the health crisis of Covid-19 particularly affected the most vulnerable populations in the precarious neighbourhoods of Ouagadougou, we can see that households were adaptable and were able to find answers to the new financial and health constraints in the short term (Guigma, 2020). The support of the state and ONEA in providing detailed solutions to water supply was welcome. However, the consequences in the medium term threaten to weaken populations without savings and those without the capacity to protect themselves in the face of uncertainty, who are suffering most from the crisis.

CONCLUSION

Burkina Faso sets an example in terms of responsiveness and the adoption of exceptional measures to enable urban populations to comply with preventative health recommendations requiring access to water. The technical responses provided by the state – making water at standpipes free and paying for the social block in monthly water bills for all households – form part of a public policy based on the principles of equal access for all urban dwellers, whether they live in formal or irregular neighborhoods. But could the health

crisis of Covid-19 not have been an incentive to think about a long-term pro-poor policy, targeting the most precarious (in urban and rural areas) in a context of growing inequality?

It is also true that civil society was not consulted in the development of the Response Plan, under the guise of a health emergency. But if participation is necessary to ensure adherence to the rules set out to counter this pandemic, it is fundamental that citizens should be involved in the formulation of policies. Furthermore, the approach must be systemic and not isolate the water issue from other issues such as job insecurity.

Finally, as the OECD (2020) reminds us, the focus on the health crisis must not overshadow other crises, particularly those related to conflicts in the Sahel (which have produced a sharp increase in the number of displaced persons), as well as the humanitarian and nutritional crisis looming in the region. The combination of these insecurities makes populations more vulnerable to the Covid-19 pandemic. As Vidal, Eboko and Williamson (2020) point out, this crisis also reflects our "difficulty in thinking of Africa as an actor on the world stage, beyond being a subject of observation by those who dictate the tempo of globalization."

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