

Project Title:

Water for the Poor?: Understanding Governance Dynamics in Small Water Enterprises in Amman

Your name and department or center

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Introduction

This project is about the roles that small water enterprises (SWE) play in formal and informal urban water governance. SWEs provide important services to millions of urban poor, but may also reinforce socio-economic inequalities. This project will investigate this tension by examining the factors that condition SWE entry into water markets, how and where SWEs provide services, and the ways in which SWEs relate to and overlap with formal water delivery systems, policies, and reforms. This project draws on urban political economy and urban water governance literatures. Existing research suggests that economic liberalization measures in cities reduce the quality of life for residents, particularly the urban poor, because of scaled back social supports. As a result NGOs, the private sector, and informal activities play a greater role in the provision of social services. This however can reinforce socio-economic disparities as informal activities are often precarious and NGO and private sector activities inadequately incorporate the voices and participation of urban residents. Urban water utilities and systems are one of many sectors that experienced significant reforms in the form of greater private sector participation in the past twenty years. Urban water governance scholarship notes that such reforms are rarely seamless or problem free because past water policies, such as infrastructure planning decisions, were often politically charged. These reforms can also reinforce socio-economic inequalities as new management logics emphasize profitability and demand management within the water utility at the expense of social equity. However, urban water governance scholarship has largely focused on urban water utilities while remaining silent about the role of informal water services and small-scale private sector activities – or small water enterprises – in the dynamics of urban water access and distribution. This project will build on analyses of privatization and commercialization of urban water systems by drawing from research in urban political economy on the rise of informal, private, and NGO services, in order to systematically analyze the roles and effects of SWEs. This project has three propositions and associated questions:

Proposition 1: SWEs provide water to poor and wealthy neighborhoods, but the nature of SWE services vary by the socio-economic characteristics of the neighborhood and geographical proximity of SWE services to neighborhoods demanding SWE services

Proposition 2: While SWEs provide water services to the urban poor, they also reinforce socio-economic inequalities.

Proposition 3: Policy reforms of formal water governance have significant implications for where SWEs operate, how they operate, and constraints to their operations.

This project combines geographic information sciences (GIS), survey analyses, and ethnography to systematically assess the spatial dynamics of access and distribution of water, the role of SWEs in urban water governance, and the relationship between SWEs and formal water governance. This project examines SWEs in Amman, Jordan, because of the unique dynamics between water shortages, extensive rationing, almost universal connections to the formal water network, and widespread SWE services. This project will broaden the scope of scholarly inquiry from the perspective of urban water governance and economic regulation to account for how informal and formal provisions and institutions overlap, interact, and re-made by investigating the growing and changing roles of SWEs and their governance practices.

Scientists and policymakers increasingly caution about the intensification of water scarcity, especially in the Middle East. The concerns of Amman could provide critical insights that may guide planning and development elsewhere in the region and other water scarce areas, such as the US southwest. This study is also critical because it will shed light on how SWEs might improve water distribution and access and provide to relief overburdened water utilities without reinforcing social inequalities. Findings from this research will

be shared with community members, academics, and policy makers in Amman and the region and in the United States at regional and national conferences, workshops, and in various academic and popular publications. As a Doctoral Research Improvement award, this project will also provide support to a graduate student to initiate a long-term research project on water scarcity, resilience planning and social justice in Middle Eastern cities.

Results

I am still in the early stages of my dissertation research. My initial proposal to the Consortium on Law and Values dealt with understanding the production of water scarcity in Damascus, Syria. Because of the geopolitical circumstances in the country, I shifted my dissertation research towards an evaluation of the effects of water policy reforms on access and distribution and the ways that small water enterprises mediate these effects. The Consortium on Law and Values grant allowed me to take the critical first steps since I had not yet conducted any research in Amman.

I utilized the dissertation research grant from the Consortium on Law and Values to begin my fieldwork in May 2012. My first research period lasted until the end of July 2012, where I networked with research institutions, academics, and policy makers. In this time, I successfully obtained billing and revenue data for Amman's 44 water districts, which I will analyze spatially and statistically with geographic information systems. My second period of research will begin in mid-September 2012 and will last until summer 2013.

While I was in Amman, I applied for and was accepted as a research affiliate with the Columbia University Middle East Research Center (CUMERC). As a research affiliate with CUMERC, I am expected to host workshops and organize presentations around my research interests. I intend on sharing preliminary results from my first period of research conducted in summer 2012.

In the coming year, I will continue conducting focus group conversations and household surveys, key-informant interviews with policy makers and policy analysis, and in-depth interviews with private water vendors on issues of water delivery, access, and scarcity. Fortunately, I was awarded the Office of International Programs Global Spotlight Dissertation Grant and the National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant for 2012-2013. Upon completing my research in Amman, I will return to Minneapolis to write and complete my dissertation.

While I do not have any specific conference presentations or publications planned at this point in time, I do intend on sharing my research with my colleagues at the Columbia University Middle East Research Center, at the Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting, at the Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Global Change at the University of Minnesota, and the Dimensions of Political Ecology Conference in Lexington Kentucky. I will also continue to research collaboration with a consortium of graduate students and academics based at the University of Minnesota, Dartmouth University, and the University of British Columbia on issues of water and development.

Future project plans

The grant provided by the Consortium on Law and Values was instrumental in allowing me to begin my research after I was forced to abandon my prior dissertation project. Upon completing my research, I will return to Minneapolis to prepare and complete my dissertation by spring 2014. In the next year, I will also begin my search for tenure-track positions and in the public and private sectors around policy and development research. My goal is to continue building my research skills and investigating how we can balance fair and sustainable development, equitable access to basic resources while maintaining the integrity of ecological systems.