How much water is enough? Domestic metered water consumption and free basic water volumes: The case of Eastwood, Pietermaritzburg

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Abstract

This article is based on an in-depth case study of urban water services to poor households in the community of Eastwood, Pietermaritzburg, in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, for the period 2005-2007. The article adopts a mixed-methodological approach. Despite government progress in delivering water infrastructure post-1994, ability to pay for the service limited access. The free basic water policy, initiated by national Government in 2001, sought to provide all citizens, but particularly the poor, with a basic supply of free water. The concessions were envisaged to improve public health, gender and equity, affordability, and as an instrument of post-apartheid redress and poverty alleviation. Once free basic water (FBW) was declared a new imperative for local government the debate on exactly how much was enough, why 6 kℓ was chosen, the structure of the offering and broader state intentions opened up. This article positions the FBW offering within the prevailing international discourse on 'need' calculation. Through the exploration of actual water consumption patterns of urban poor households, the ideological assumptions and 'scientific' calculations underpinning this discourse were found to have ignored the fluidity of use as well as the value of water beyond mere physiological need. In this regard, access to FBW was conditioned on a small household size and further predicated the modification of normal water activities and lifestyle and carried a disproportionate social cost. The free basic volume of 6 kℓ was found to have no resonance with actual water volumes consumed by the majority of Eastwood households.

Keywords: free basic water, indigent, basic water requirements, water usage, municipal water services, urban poor household