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Political, legal and administrative constraints on appropriate sanitation policies in Zambia

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Dr D M Todd

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INTRODUCTION

A critical problem in implementing alternative sanitation policies in many Third World countries is that of persuading policy makers at national and local level that alternative sanitation is an acceptable option. In Zambia, few such politicians and administrators have been convinced of the necessity to pursue the matter urgently, since the dominant viewpoint remains that waterborne sanitation is the only suitable system, and that this will be provided for all at some unspecified time when the economy takes a dramatic upswing. In the meantime, unlined, unimproved pit latrines proliferate in the expanding squatter settlements, leading towards an inevitable sanitation crisis.

In this paper, I attempt to pinpoint the main obstacles which prevent the adoption of an appropriate national sanitation policy. These can be summarised as; entrenched housing inequalities, legal barriers, the division of responsibility for sanitation between various Ministries and Agencies, the inadequacies of National and Urban Development Planning, the lack of appropriate research, and the fragmentary nature of development aid.

I concentrate on urban sanitation, because I believe this to be a more urgent problem than rural sanitation in Zambia for the following reasons; firstly, the urban areas already contain over forty per cent of the population, and this proportion will rise as the young age structure gives rise to natural increase. Secondly, the "standards" issue is more critical in urban areas, where pit latrines are more unacceptable to politicians than they are in rural areas. Thirdly, urban land is relatively scarce, and dwellings are close together in squatter settlements, leading to a time limit on pit relocation. This dimension is absent in the rural areas, allowing a certain "breathing space" in which to find solutions there.

HOUSING INEQUALITIES

Sanitation policies are inextricably linked to the provision of low-cost housing, and

can only be presented in that context.

Zambia's colonial inheritance in the housing field consisted of a dual structure - a few palatial residences previously occupied by the white minority, and a substantial but inadequate number of mainly sub-standard dwellings occupied by the African workforce. After Independence, there was a rapid influx of migrants to the urban areas, causing a housing demand which far outstripped supply.

The Independent Government had to be seen to be reducing inequality in the housing field, but chose to do so by raising standards at the lower end, without reducing those at the top. Local Authorities were even more determined that "low cost housing" should be of high quality, including mains services and water closets. The result of this pursuit of quality was an ever-increasing backlog of urban dwellers with no formal housing, forced to live in unauthorised settlements without even the most basic facilities.

Gradually, reality caught up with the Government, and "alternative" housing policies, such as site and service housing and squatter upgrading were reluctantly espoused. However, this trend was undercut by a fundamental weakness - a system by which those in well-paid jobs receive, in addition, large subsidies on the rental of their fully-serviced houses. In the meantime, those living in Council houses must pay what is intended to be the full economic rent for their accommodation.

The extent of housing subsidies for Civil Servants and parastatal employees can be demonstrated from housing expenditure figures during the Second National Development Plan period. Institutional and Civil Service housing construction (high and medium cost) received Kwacha 84 million (K1.00 equals £0.38 in February 1985), fifty per cent above the budgeted level, whereas the general housing programmes (mostly low-cost, including squatter upgrading) received only K57 million out of an allocated K100 million. At the same

time, the annual subsidy on housing for Civil Servants and parastatal employees was in the order of K90 to K100 million (ref. 1).

The impact of housing policy on the acceptability of alternative sanitation is therefore very clear. The Government has reluctantly moved towards policies accepting lower standards, including squatter upgrading and it is likely that it would be willing to embrace alternative sanitation as part of this package. However, in practice, it has continued to spend most of its money on high and medium cost housing, and therefore on waterborne sanitation. Only if the Government can be persuaded to align its resource allocation to its stated intention to improve housing for the majority will alternative sanitation have any chance of being implemented on a large scale. Those interested in promoting new methods must therefore first promote an equitable housing policy.

The next barriers to progress in this field can be found in the legal system, to which I now turn.

THE LAW AND SANITATION

The two most important Acts relating to sanitation are the Public Health Act and The Local Government Administration Act. Under the Public Health Act, it is stated that a Council may require anyone under its jurisdiction using any type of toilet other than a water closet to convert it into one "within a reasonable time". Further, the supporting Regulations of the Act declare that no pit latrine can be constructed without the written approval of the Local Authority, which will dictate the materials to be used, and the design which is approved by the Medical Officer of Health.

These rules are, of course, not applied, but their continued presence can be seen as discouraging the development of an appropriate sanitation strategy. The next major problem is the political and administrative system.

SANITATION POLICY AND ADMINISTRATION

The Development of a coherent sanitation policy is hindered by the plethora of National Ministries and Agencies which deal with the topic, and by the diverse Departments at Local Authority level.

Nationally, the Provincial and Local Government Administration Division has taken over the responsibilities formerly held by the Ministry of Local Government and Housing. The National Housing Authority and the Department of Town and Country Planning also

come under the same Division, which is headed by a Minister of State, and thus has less capacity than does a Ministry to ensure that its requirements receive priority. The aim of the change was to decentralise control of Local Authority housing to the relevant areas. While this no doubt has virtues, it also reduces the capacity to develop innovative National approaches.

Sanitation is also clearly of interest to the Ministry of Health, both for its Planning and Development, and Medical Care and Preventive Medicine Sections. The Ministry of Agriculture and Water Development's Department of Water Affairs also has an important role in this area, although its expertise lies mainly in waterborne systems.

Additionally, The Ministry of Works and Supply is responsible for Civil Service housing, a major consumer of sanitation; while the Ministry of Labour and Social Services also enters the field, through its Community Development Department.

Given the complex web of Ministries and Agencies which might claim some say in sanitation policy matters, the simplest tendency is towards inertia.

At the Local Government level, sanitation also suffers from being of concern to several different Departments. A study conducted in the then Lusaka City Council showed that co-ordination between the Public Health and Sewage Sections was very poor, leading to wholly inadequate maintenance performance. Although Public Health officials had to oversee emptying of aqua-prives, for example, they had no idea of the maintenance requirements of the particular system, which had been constructed by the Engineering Section. They thus tended to pump out the liquid and softer solids, and leave solid waste in the tank, uncovered by any water seal (ref. 2). Clearly, it is not reasonable to expect junior Public Health officials to know how an aqua privy operates unless they have detailed liaison with Engineers regarding the specific design features of the system.

Similarly, because construction is carried out by Engineers, and maintenance by Public Health workers, it is impossible to obtain accurate information concerning the overall relative costs of the various systems. Engineers and Public Health Workers in Lusaka still think mainly in terms of extending the sewerage system, while it is mainly officials in the Housing and Social Work Sections who have a realistic view of the situation in the low income settlements.

Unfortunately, the Council is not structured for effective interdisciplinary action.

Contact between the Standing Committees of Senior Officers, which present policy measures to the Lusaka Urban District Council meetings, and field staff in the settlements is minimal. Only under the special organisation of the Lusaka Housing Project Unit was there regular two-way communication, notably through weekly meetings at which Field Team leaders met with Head Office Staff to discuss difficulties in operationalising policies. This has not been repeated in later upgrading projects in Lusaka.

Even major Councils, such as the Lusaka Urban District Council, have no research units, although since the Government system was decentralised in 1980, they have enormous powers and responsibilities. This promotes a strong tendency to continue operating along the familiar lines, which have achieved a degree of success in the past. New developments are not given top priority.

Those interested in propagating the promotion of suitable sanitation systems must therefore address themselves to the issue of co-ordination at both national and local levels if they are to have any chance of success. The lamentable failure to develop policies or actions in this area in the past is well illustrated by National and Urban Development Plans.

SANITATION IN NATIONAL AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT PLANS

In Zambia's three National Development Plans there has been progress towards affordable sanitation as a policy for low cost housing, but this has not yet led to action. Thus, in the First N.D.P., sanitation did not appear as a topic. Under the Second N.D.P., the concept of squatter upgrading was introduced, but sewered systems were proposed. No budgetary provision was made for sanitation projects nationally.

By the time of the Third N.D.P., the urgency of the housing and related sanitation situation was indicated. The Plan states that eighty per cent of new urban households can only hope for partly serviced plots, without waterborne sanitation. It concludes that "alternative sanitation methods will be used. Government will, therefore, pursue actively a sanitation research programme, designed to introduce an economic solution to sanitation in low-cost housing areas" (ref. 3). However, no funds whatsoever are allocated for such a research programme, although 29 sanitation and water projects of a "conventional" nature receive budgetary provision.

The T.N.D.P. specifies the National Housing Authority as the Agency which will conduct the research, even though it has no research budget; and such activities are therefore restricted to what can be subsidised out of house sales and rentals, or externally financed. Inevitable, this implies very lengthy delays. Although N.H.A. is seen as playing a central role in the development of a national sanitation policy by the TNDP it is not represented on the National Action Committee of the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade, which is currently drawing up a national plan for these facilities. This again illustrates the fundamental lack of co-ordination in the sanitation field.

If the National Development Plans have had minimal impact on sanitation policy, Urban Development Plans have failed even more comprehensively. Four Plans, dealing with areas of different size, were investigated—those for Kitwe (364,000 in 1978), Chingola (134,000 in 1975), Livingstone (43,500 in 1975), and Mpika (8,000 in 1975). All list schemes for the extension of waterborne sanitation, but none make any mention whatsoever of alternative possibilities.

Clearly, the concept of alternative sanitation has not found its way into the consciousness of those responsible for planning Zambia's urban areas, whether they be internal (National Housing Authority), or external (Doxiadis). Here again, before progress can be made, planners need to be re-educated.

ALTERNATIVE SANITATION RESEARCH AND PROJECTS

Despite its early start in alternative sanitation (with aqua privies in the 1960's) Zambia now lags behind many of its neighbours in East and Central Africa. A study conducted by the National Housing Authority in 1979 recommended certain systems for field trials. The fact that no follow-up study has resulted indicates that the research was not part of a continuing development strategy.

However, when the National Housing Authority was given the task of implementing the first European Development Fund Sites and Services Project in six District Centres in rural areas, the sanitation provision was to be Ventilated Improved Pits, although the option of installing a w.c. to septic tank was also available. The six participating Councils were to take responsibility for organising self-help construction, technical assistance and so forth, with direction and assistance from N.H.A.

Unfortunately, project implementation does not seem to have followed the approved direction, since most participants have built ordinary pit latrines, rather than V.I.P.s. It appears that while the N.H.A.'s construction co-ordinators were briefed on the correct V.I.P. construction, they did not pass this on to the Councils' Assistant Co-ordinators or to participants. Furthermore, no demonstration units were constructed in order to spread knowledge of the new design and its benefits, and the specially constructed vent pipes were not generally available. As well as these operational difficulties, it seems that some of the Councils concerned were of the opinion that a new housing scheme using pit latrines could damage their perceived prestige.

It is clear that much detailed preparatory information needs to be given to Councils of all sizes, if an innovative toilet type such as the V.I.P. is to be introduced. Central and Local Government Officials generally regard such ideas as unacceptable, and as a lowering of standards. Such is the tradition of collections problems, subsidies, and so forth, among Local Authorities that affordability to consumers and Councils is not yet seen as a primary consideration. Expectations as to what can and should be provided are still far too high.

INTERNATIONAL AID AND SANITATION

In 1975, the World Health Organisation and the IBRD jointly prepared a Water Supply and Sewerage Sector Study for Zambia (ref. 4). Unfortunately, this simply proposed vast expenditure to extend waterborne sanitation wherever it was needed, and it rapidly became another shelved report of merely historical interest.

In 1979, the National Housing Authority study was financed by the International Development Research Centre of Canada, which has played a major role internationally in the alternative sanitation field. It is not, however, an implementing agency. UNICEF is showing interest in beginning "environmental sanitation" projects, while UNCHS is training Housing Officers and related personnel in upgrading techniques. The EDF is promoting Sites and Services projects with VIPs, and the Finnish Government is aiding the NHA. The International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade promises a flurry of activity over a limited period.

All of these international efforts will no doubt make worthwhile inputs, but the critical problem is how to work out a sustained and consistent approach to the development and implementation of an appropriate sanitation programme throughout Zambia. At the

moment, a sense of direction and commitment is lacking, largely because of the related factors discussed earlier. Unless this sense can be developed, it is certain that no substantial progress will be made. If foreign aid is to make an impact on the problem it will need to be much more closely co-ordinated than it has been thus far.

CONCLUSIONS

If alternative sanitation is to establish itself in Zambian development policy, a radical change in thinking at the levels of Central and Local Government is necessary. Unless sanitation experts realise this, their efforts will produce only disjointed pockets of change. Sanitation must be considered as part of the overall problem of housing provision, since the "appropriateness" of a latrine is inevitable judged in relation to the housing area in which it is located.

If appropriate sanitation is to reach a substantial proportion of the population, it will therefore be necessary to reduce the amount of money spent on high and medium cost housing construction, completely realign the subsidy system to favour low income families, and concentrate on "upgrading" squatter settlements and providing "basic" serviced plots.

In the area of legislation, the preoccupation with positive prescriptions for sewerage reticulation, and negative references to other systems needs to be revised. Alternative sanitation needs to be legitimised, and impractical, redundant, regulations removed.

With regard to the numerous Ministries and Agencies involved in the field, co-ordination must become regular and permanent. The NHA should be strengthened, adequately funded, and given responsibility for relevant research. Co-ordination is also essential at the Local Government level. Accurate records concerning different systems must be kept, and a local research capacity founded.

In urban and national planning, alternative sanitation programmes must be specified and funded. Trial projects should begin with intensive briefing of Council Officers, and demonstration units are essential. External aid must be co-ordinated by NHA to reflect Zambian priorities.

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