

CHAPTER 2

Economic, ecological and climate justice – literacy and politics, from rights to commons

by Wahu Kaara

Coordinator, Kenya Debt Relief Network (KENDREN)

As an actor in the trenches of the Global Justice Movement and specifically in our work around debt, aid, and economic governance, KENDREN—the Kenya Debt Relief Network—continues to hold a strong position against International Financial Institutions (IFIs – namely the World Bank, the IMF and their generic versions, the International Finance Corporation and the African Development Bank). We work in a policy space that spans African economies and development models.

KENDREN was founded at the time of the 1999 Jubilee movement for cancelling international debt, or dropping the debt. We participated in the World Summit for Sustainable Development in 2002, and helped to create a national consultative process. KENDREN holds debt clinics in local communities to discuss issues with the poor. People may be poor, but they still owe debt – an average of 30,000 shillings is the amount of debt that Kenyans pay to international creditors every month. Most people don't even know they have this money! We introduce the subject in a participatory way, and promote economic and ecological and climate justice literacy.

We interact with those who are most vested in these issues: the urban poor, because they hold the power for social transformation. They are very integrated in the money economy; they cannot eat without money and they need to pay rent, but they do not have guaranteed sources of income. They have to be innovative to secure income. So there is a lot of energy in poor communities. KENDREN's greatest objective is to build networking connections with those who are agents of social transformation, and to build social movements or join others in strengthening the social movements that every community does have, since each community has its own issues and problems on which they need to act. Communities must be the driving force and power behind their own interests.

We noticed that when we started talking with participants about ecological debt, people were confused. But the economic debt has a very clear relationship with ecological debt, which is why KENDREN is involved in climate change and environmental issues. We participated in the Climaforum at COP 16 in Copenhagen, drawing linkages between economic justice, ecological justice, and climate justice. Clima and Social Forums mobilized the communities to have village assemblies on debt, and also to hold bigger manifestation of this in their own congresses (their constitutional assemblies). The issues discussed in these assemblies are related to the environment and climate change; the economic literacy of the people is beginning to manifest itself into literacy on environment and climate justice, as well.

The international "debt relief" movement is motivated by the conviction that so-called "debtor" nations have in fact funded economic growth in the so-called "creditor" nations for centuries, first via colonialism and the slave trade, and

subsequently via huge interest and foreign exchange payments, and resource exports, to banks, governments, and transnational corporations, which dwarf the aid and loan transfers going the other way. This analysis is easily extended to climate change and the “climate debt”: those who have consumed the vast majority of climate-change-causing fossil fuels are in fact those who owe a “climate debt” to the rest of the world’s population, who are suffering from the effects of climate change. The way to bring about “climate debt relief,” just like “debt relief,” is to share the burdens and the benefits more fairly across time and space.

Our logic in analyzing these issues is informed by the fact that, inherently, there exist particular “commons” that are shared among all humans and other beings. However, different people have different access to these commons. The economic logic that contextualizes societal relations and dynamics from the lenses of a neo-liberal market model is a destructive construct inasmuch as it pursues a profit motive at the expense of human progress and societal advancement. This relates to financial debt, climate debt, and also to water governance. It is critical to move the discussion beyond the “rights” rhetoric to a more persuasive discussion on “commons.”

Let me illustrate. Nairobi is a city of slightly more than four million people. By all indicators, it’s a robust city in more ways than one, but it is also a city that is caught up in the contradictions of inequality. With regard to Nairobi’s water governance, today we boast of the leading company on water management, The Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company—a water service provider and subsidiary of the Nairobi City Council. This company is a spinoff from when water

was managed by the Nairobi City Council. And when I say management, I am referring to the sourcing, distribution, maintenance and management of water. Core arguments revolve around the inefficiency of Nairobi City Council and the partial privatization of the water company after 2002, under the tutelage of the World Bank and other donors, which assigned the management and provision of water and sewerage services to Water Service Providers (WSPs).

Incidentally, the main thrust informing this decision was that state enterprises would fail when involved in complex business like water. As a result the best framework is to have the state as the regulatory framework, leaving the day-to-day management and distribution issues to the private company.

This is indeed a compelling argument when it's analyzed or presented from the position of those who can afford to pay for it.

The "rights" to "commons" argument I make is hinged on the fact that "water is life". It may not be a "right" per se in the context of paying for it, but in terms of a need for all (across class, purchasing power and address) there inherently lies the "commons" will to access both clean and consumable water for all.

The argument that the state cannot perform this function fails to contextualize the role of the state as not only a distributor and regulator of competing needs in society, but most importantly as a defender of social equity. Or perhaps, this argument represents an example of "mindset capture" by the forces of the market.

Living Examples: Scenario 1

Huruma is a densely populated region of Nairobi, located approximately 10

kilometers east of the central business district, and is home to millions of low-income working-class families, casual workers, and others in the majority who are eking out a city life. Arguably, it is not a slum according to the typical definition, though the district includes various dense low-income neighbourhoods—Mathare, Huruma Flats, Korogocho and Kariobangi.

Key contestations here revolve around “illegal” water connections and a vibrant sub-economy that is characterized by mushrooming “car washes”, water vending, communal showers and toilets. In this regard, there exists a buoyant “underground” economy that rests on the ingenuity of local residents to tap into the city water grid to run local enterprises. The sanctity of doing so is still debatable, but it has to be recognized that this form of “local economy” goes a long way in securing livelihoods for the majority of the urban poor in these regions.

It’s equally a powerful testament to local innovation in the wake of the debilitating effects of being at the base of the societal pyramid. The argument here is that the water should equally serve to help residents secure their livelihoods, in just the same way that large enterprises use tons of water for their production. Thus, the battles in Huruma are less about having enough water per household, and more about the economic value that can be derived from its utilization. Although the battles have all too often been bloody, a certain sense of an uneasy agreement between the residents and the water company seems to exist. For a certain level of access, the residents will protect the water pipelines from vandalism. Thus, an informal unity of purpose exists; the company needs to keep its grid going and the residents can continue with their water-based businesses.

Living Examples: Scenario 2

Kibera, on the other hand, holds a development record as the largest slum in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is the site of a large influx of development work — both international and local organizations have made inroads here, in sectors ranging from health to water to the World Bank's own slum upgrading project.

Unlike Huruma, Kibera seems to be in tune with its plight. Despite the large concentration of people and the hazards related to this, Kibera's access to clean and safe drinking water is laudable. Kibera is in a sense a poster child for development, since most residents do have access to clean and safe drinking water.

But here is the catch: in most instances, the water is piped to common points from which the residents draw the water, ideally managed by a local community group. A 20-liter can retails for about 5-10 Kenyan shillings, which in effect means that water consumers in Kibera on average spend more on water than their counterparts in relatively well-off neighbourhoods.

In both these examples, slum dwellers have less access to water than richer people. But water, which falls from heaven, is a necessity of life, and so the "commons" framework is highly appropriate for considering water access – much more so than a market framework.

Through KENDREN's economic literacy programs, we began working years ago with people in Huruma. We have been energized by their commitment to addressing environmental issues, such as garbage collection. Through the economic literacy programs, the people begin to feel that they need to take control

of their lives and take some responsibility if anything is ever going to change in their communities. It is an amazing process that has brought even those who have experienced crime to develop a way of alternative action and alternative thinking. They began to organize houses to pay the neighbourhood's young people to collect and dispose of garbage. This created a big question between them and the city council, since they needed to interrogate the by-laws, and sought legal advice on behalf of the community. In fact, this process has linked all of Nairobi's informal settlements or poor settlements, because garbage is a problem everywhere.

Critical also is that Kibera and Huruma are part of the Nairobi River System, which is very polluted. In recent years, the cleaning of Nairobi River has become very important. The UN Environment Programme, based in Nairobi, has a proposal for cleaning up the river and making it habitable for local residents and families. It is full of brilliant ideas as to how to transform Nairobi—how to promote tourism, sporting events, concerts along the river, street soccer, etc. These activities can make this community a manifestation of the future of Kenya.

Building social movements becomes very critical, along with linkages of knowledge and ideas that lie within the communities. This knowledge is a living library that is never exhausted; people are not difficult to follow because you meet them everyday and hear their daily stories and testimonies. We must learn to make linkages with formalized knowledge from the universities, and formal research, and begin to document the knowledge of communities.

Climate change is giving poor communities an opportunity to go into depth and participate with the politics of economics, the politics of environment and the politics of climate change itself -- especially within the international discourse framework of mitigation and adaptation

Conclusion

Faced with the gigantic growth of African cities, a better-defined and broadly-accepted strategy on water governance needs to be sought. This must take into context the varied needs of the different population segments which cities like Nairobi present. Otherwise water will be a big challenge and an open site for new contestations into the future, and these contestations will be heightened by climate change.

Second, the role of the state in water governance must be rethought. After structurally adjusting our economies for over two decades, the verdict is in: the state still has a great role to play, especially by setting the regulatory framework and enforcing notions of equity and equality.

Third, the fundamentals of the new discourse on water must move beyond the rhetoric of “rights” to “commons”, particularly because fundamental freedoms are so important that all people must know that society’s structures involve them as actors and collaborators in decision-making.

Most importantly, the paradigm must shift from blind market orientation to promotion and recognition of the key role of the state in adjudicating societal concerns. And by this, I do not mean the cosmetic application of liberal democracy,

but a more in-depth indigenous approach to local problem-solving. In this regard, cross-learning across nations will be vital in defending the shared common wealth and the “commons” of water as the foundation of our common subsistence.

Kenya is so fortunate because our new constitution is already in place. The constitution establishes the principle of subsidiarity and brings the process of decision making to where people are. This will help to locate the reality that there is alternative thinking, alternative action and alternative ways of moving forward— from the very dispossessed, from the ashes. Community knowledge should be respected in matters of mitigation and adaptation to climate change. We cannot deny that people can lift themselves out of their dispossession.