

# Privatizing life

FOR THE PEOPLE OF MALAWI, PRIVATE OWNERSHIP OF PUBLIC WATER SERVICES GOES AGAINST THEIR TRADITIONS OF SHARING AND COMMUNITY

“Water is synonymous to life, to sacredness. To privatize life is incomprehensible,” says Ndumanene Silungwe, psychology lecturer at the St. John of God College of Mental Health Sciences in Mzuzu, a city in northern Malawi. For Malawians, privatization of water—allowing private companies to manage and control water services—is a deliberate destruction of life itself. It goes against the Malawian traditions of togetherness (*ukaliro wakupweleran* or *nenenamene*), solidarity (*umoza*), and interdependence (*kunkalilana*). These traditions require that community members care for and look after each other’s needs and interests. Today, in this small country in East Central Africa, these values are being challenged.

Malawi is considered one of the poorest countries in the world with its financial wealth concentrated in the hands of a few elite. The majority of Malawi’s 11 million residents lack basic health, sanitation and education services, and more than 14 percent of the population is infected with HIV/AIDS. One in five children dies before the age of five from HIV/AIDS, and from malaria and other water-borne diseases.

Only 32 percent of the population have access to safe water within a kilometre of their homes and most people live without indoor plumbing. In urban areas, a communal water tap is shared among 20 or more families who pay for their water by the pail or



Mrs. Silumbu, carrying her son Joseph, fills her water pail at a communal tap. Two young women wait their turn. St. Patrick’s compound, Rumphi, Malawi.

through metres.

In rural areas, people walk many kilometres to a borehole (small well) for clean water. Women and girls traditionally bear this burden of fetching the family’s water, carrying it in large aluminum pails on their heads. We often see children carrying water in large plastic containers from small stagnant streams or sloughs. Many of these water sources have become contaminated due to a lack of funds or training for proper maintenance.

In response to poor fiscal performance of publicly-managed services, the government has been developing plans to privatize its water system. The Min-

istry of Water Development, with funding from the World Bank, is carrying out a comprehensive study of the water boards in the two largest cities, Lilongwe and Blantyre. The plan is to introduce a regulatory framework to set water tariffs, while allowing for a more commercial operation.

These trends greatly concern our colleagues, Isabella Msolomba, principal, and Alex Nkosi, pastoral counsellor, at the St. John of God College in Mzuzu. Both live in the city where communal taps are the norm. In 1998, the government in Blantyre raised water prices so high that many people could not afford to pay for water at the communal taps. The



By Beverley and Ray Vantomme

people returned to abandoned and contaminated sloughs and wells, which caused a cholera outbreak. We listened as Alex and Isabella expressed their concern that with privatization there will be more rising prices and no leniency for outstanding bills. The result would be frequent water shut-offs and expensive re-connections.

With or without privatization of water, the availability of clean water resources is not likely to improve for the poor or those in rural areas. Government water programs are not aimed at these difficult to reach areas because of the high costs. Village leaders have told us that they look to Church and non-governmental organizations to assist their communities.

One of these organizations is the Christian Service Committee comprised of 28 Christian Churches in Malawi. Their Water and Sanitation Program is aimed at improving the livelihood of rural communities in Malawi by reducing the incidence of water borne diseases, reducing the burden on women and girls, and assisting villages in managing their water sources.

Women are a majority on these village water management committees, according to Ms. Chisono Gunda of the Christian Service Committee: “Because women are most affected by the hardship of distant water sources, they’re most likely to get behind the project.”

Like all Malawians, our col-

leagues in Mzuzu remain connected with the villages where they were born and raised, returning often and doing what they can to help the community. They speak of women and children in the village arising each morning to gather water together from a common water source.

For African Christians, the concept of family and community is at the heart of their understanding of Jesus, the Gospel and Eucharist. They live core values of interdependence and solidarity, sharing life together cooperatively. For the gentle people of Malawi, the “warm heart of Africa,” privatization of water is privatization of life, which goes against their lived experience of faith and community.∞

Scarboro lay missionaries Ray and Beverley Vantomme were first missioned to Malawi in January 1996. They work in health care in collaboration with the St. John of God Hospital Brothers.

## For reflection:

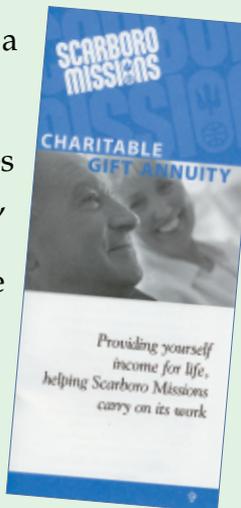
- What does privatization of water mean to us as followers of Jesus, as Canadian Christians in solidarity with the poor in Malawi and other developing countries?

- How does this touch our sense of Christian community, our sense of Eucharist?

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