

The issue of water for all in Paris

Bernard O. Barraqué, CNRS

I'm no expert on homelessness, but I am quite aware of the issue of water poverty and human rights to water and social tariffs.

There is an important difference between Paris and the other capital cities in this seminar : in France, due to national solidarity funding mechanisms set up after WW2, there are quasi no citizens remaining unconnected to water supply ; only some 0.2% of houses in remote areas depend on their own well. It is not quite the same for sewerage however : due to the low density of the country in average, and the important number of secondary homes, there remains 5 million septic tanks, and the homes they serve will not be connected to a sewer, it would be too expensive. The French are experiencing the development of public services to control and sometimes to manage septic tanks on behalf of their owners. In the end, it is clear that the main issue of the water poor in French cities is people who face difficulties to pay their water charges and of course their rent. The issue of homeless and non-connected people, which is indeed rising again within new slums, is considered secondary.

In Paris every building is connected to both water and sanitation, and at relatively cheap costs due to the very high population density (above 20 000 inh/km²). And metering is universal, except that for historical reasons, there is only one meter per building (93000 meters for a resident population of 2.2 million plus another million coming to work in office buildings and other services on week days). In most small coop housing in Paris, the bill of the collective meter is spread between residents following the surfaces of the apartments. In some cases like large public housing units, there is sub-metering, allowing building managers and public housing operators to spread the collective bill according to the volumes used. Since building managers are usually in capacity to pay, the amount of bills in arrears is very small (less than 2%). However, in France like in other European countries, the implementation of the United Nations' right2water declaration has led to a 2013 law banning disconnection of non-paying subscribers. And since then, the amount of bills in arrears is steadily on the rise. Yet it is very difficult for either public or private operators to find out whether the non-payers are can't pay or won't pay.

This situation of collective metering clearly advantages residents of collective housing who can divide the fixed part of the subscription to water supply between themselves : even if this fixed part is higher (according to the diameter of the meter), once divided by the number of housing units it lowers their bills significantly compared to single family homes. This is why, once they are explained this situation, they are often quite reluctant to move towards what ecologists and many petty bourgeois advocate, i.e. switching to individual metering and billing. And to tell the truth, they can rely on the fact that indoor elasticity of consumption to price is quite small, so that the cost of additional meters usually outweighs the benefits which can be expected. Operators also know this and they usually are happy to have less but larger meters to read and bill. Yet some of them (Suez, some public *régies*) are ready to test individual metering and billing if the elected local authorities in charge of controlling the services request them to do it.

But on the other hand it makes it difficult to implement social tariff systems. It is quite difficult to identify the potential beneficiaries of social support, all the more so that they either ignore their

rights or are ashamed to request any help. Under-declaration is the rule. To obtain better information, and set up a water cheques system, water operators have to contact the various social services : the CCAS (communal centres of social action), The CAF (family benefits institutions) and the CPAM (social security health care benefits). Sometimes these public institutions refuse to co-operate with water suppliers, making it difficult to bring support to the real water poor.

The consumer justice type of ideology which was born in the US triggering the development of increasing block tariff systems crossed the Atlantic, and found many supporters among economists, media and political parties. The result is that many mayors are convinced that with an appropriate increasing block tariff (that they have in mind), they could meet both goals of incentivising water conservation and social access to water. I have shown in particular in a study for Paris, that it is not the case, and I have even convinced the Council of Paris not to adopt individual metering and block tariffs : why do this if, in the present situation with no incentives, Paris water volumes sold collapsed by 30% in the last 20 years ... reducing symmetrically the revenues of all institutions depending on income from water bills : not only water supply but also waste water collection and treatment, and environmental funding.

4 possibilities to support water access to all

French cities can use 4 types of additional policies to do this :

- Meeting poor families and training them to use water wisely (many people freshly come from developing countries have a different relationship to water as a free resource).
- Targeting families at risk of not paying their bills and support them to avoid potential disconnection of flow reduction.
- Helping writing off water debts for families that have stopped paying and have a temporary justification ; this is done through a national system run at *département* level, called housing solidarity fund (FSL), covering rent, electricity, gas and water bills... It is difficult to target families that live in collective housing units and thus do not receive a bill themselves.
- And of course, improving conditions of access to water and sanitation to unconnected people (homeless, Roma camps, refugees etc.) through development of standpipes, free bathhouses and laundry points etc.

In Paris, the first measure presented in a public meeting by deputy mayor Anne le Strat in 2013, may seem strange, but it is indeed very important : keeping water tariff as low as possible while maintaining the infrastructure in good order : if water is cheap for all, it is cheap for the poor too. Water tariff in Paris is well below the national average, partly for historical density reasons.

The city of Paris is also experimenting the installation of water conserving kits in low income housing : 15000 housing units were equipped in 2011, for an average bill reduction of 100€ or 15%

Then there is a water allowance for Parisians receiving housing benefits from the Municipality : 40,300 households received an average of 70€ in 2010

Next is financial support through the FSL to Parisians unable to pay outstanding bills : 5,500 households received an average of 80 € to pay outstanding water bills in 2010

Next measure is to suspend disconnection of non paying customers. Disconnections are limited to unoccupied buildings where there remains leaks. Squats are not disconnected until an eviction order has been issued by the court, and once an agreement has been found with the squatters.

There is also a policy to eliminate substandard housing : there are now only 2% Paris housing units without toilets or a bathroom, and an ongoing plan is supporting sanitary improvement of shelters.

Free access to drinking water and sanitation facilities is improved with 1200 public fountains (standpipes), and above 30 bathhouses, some of which equipped with laundry. The social services also distribute free water bottles and maps indicating where free facilities are located.

The last part of the plan is to create access points with water services for 'travellers' (migrants, refugees etc.)

It remains to be seen how well this seemingly impressive water access policy is working in practice. This is a question to be eventually answered by Wenjing Guo and Nita Chaudhuri who have more field experience than me. However, I have never heard of street demonstrations by water poor claiming for some water right. There are Roma camps where Gipsy people do complain about bad quality of their condition, but there are none of these camps in the city of Paris itself, and in addition, the real issue is lack of space in the camps for the rising number of Roma and other refugees. Given the number of municipalities and départements involved, it is beyond the scope of this quick summary to develop what is happening at the level of greater Paris.