

Pleading With The Water Goddess: Water Limits Mutomo Market Growth

Mutua Isika, G-C.M Mutiso and Milu Muyanga

Mutomo market is approximately situated 60 km. to the south from Kitui town. It is Mutomo sub-district headquarters. Syombua Muange is a water vendor in Mutomo Market. She says that the business of selling water in Mutomo is one of the toughest businesses to run in what she calls, God forsaken town. During the dry season, she says, the town has two alternative sources of water: scoop holes in Nzeeu river and Mbunya-aka rock catchment. Nzeeu river and Mbunya-aka are 8 km and 5 km respectively from Mutomo town. Water from Nzeeu is salty and it goes for Ksh. 25 while water from Mbunya-aka goes for Ksh. 30 per 20-litre jerrican. She says that the quality of water from Mbunya-aka is "clean", however the source is characterised by hilly terrain making it dangerous to people and donkeys. The source is not accessible by other means of fetching water like motor vehicles and carts. Therefore, it is mainly women who fetch water from this source, and probably, this is why the source is called Mbunya-aka (Women pincher).

During the dry season, Syombua says she only manages two trips a day and fetches four 20-litre jerricans. She only sells two 20-litre jerricans and reserves 40 litres for domestic use. She says if there were a source closer to Mutomo she would be in a position to increase her trips and sales.

During the wet season, water vendors fetch water from Yambuu rock catchment and sell it for ten shillings per 20-litre jerrican.

Raphael Nyoka is the Finance Administrator in Mutomo Mission Hospital. He says water in Mutomo remains a major impediment to developing the hospital. Mutomo hospital has to spend enormous resources in search of guaranteed supply of water through out the year. The hospital has three major sources of water, Ndovoini borehole, Kyome earth dam and its extensive roof catchment system. The hospital uses its own resources to pipe water from Ndovoini and Kyome. Water from Ndovoini and Kyome is pumped and stored in large storage tanks situated on relatively high altitude in the hospital grounds. This enables the water to flow from the water tanks to the hospital by gravity. It also has water-pumping generators at the sources. Mr. Nyoka says if water could have been nearer and readily available, the resource committed to be diverted to diverted to enhancing medical services.

Water from Ndovoini is salty and mainly used for washing. Major users of water in the hospital are the in-patients and the hospital staff. Water rationing is also practised. Water from the storage tanks is opened for members of staff one hour in a day. The staff also gets a supplementary 40 litres per day. Kyome earth dam is mainly used during the wet season. This is in order to compete with high evaporation and seepage rates.

Mr. Patrick Kavisa and Mr. Cornelius Ngala, head teachers at Kitoo and Kiange Primary Schools respectively, say retaining teachers in schools around Mutomo market is an impossible task. This is because of the high cost associated with water compared to other living expenses. For example, Mr. Kavisa, resides with a family of three in Mutomo town, the family uses 40 litres of water per day, which they buy at an average of Ksh. 20 per 20-litre jerrican through out the year. This translates to Ksh. 1,200 per month compared to house rent of Ksh. 500. He further says the cost of boiling drinking water is Ksh. 3.50 per 20 litres translating to Ksh. 251 in a month. Naturally, the cost of water is supposed to be cheaper than the cost of housing which is not the case in Mutomo.

Mutomo Academy is a relatively new mixed day and boarding primary and secondary school with a population of 80 students. Mutomo Academy harvests rainwater by roof and rock catchment and stores it in ground water tanks. The Principal, Mr. Raphael Kituva says water

problem is acute during the dry months of September and October. He says the institution spends Ksh. 18,000 on water during these months. He can't really gauge the amount of money used in boiling drinking water in the school. He predicts that the water problem is bound to become more serious with the increasing school enrolment. He says that for the school to prepare itself for increased enrolment, a well is being dug in the school compound. He says the locating of the well was not professionally done and he doesn't know how deep they will have to dig to get this precious commodity. At the time of the interview, the well was 60-feet deep.

Water for large-scale use is sourced from Matinga earth dam (in Ikutha Division), roughly ten kilometres from Mutomo town. Tiva (over ten kilometres) and Ntheeu (about 8 Kms.) rivers are not appropriate for large scale harvesting due to slow infiltration rates and contamination from Kitui town.

Relatively well-off households have initiated private search for water. This is the case with the households of Mr. Elijah Nthenge (businessman) and Mr. Dominic Ndunda Ntheeu, a businessman and a local leader respectively. Both households harvest rainwater. They have large ground water tanks. Besides, the two households have dug deep wells. Mr. Elijah's well is 83 feet deep and provides water through out the year. However, he says the water from this well is hard. Lack of technical expertise in locating wells remains a big challenge and makes the exercise quite expensive. Mr. Nthenge says use of local knowledge is employed in locating the wells. Presence of Munina (acacia eliator), Mukuyu (fig tree), and Mukomoa trees imply presence of ground water. However, he talks of a disappointing experience of one Mr. Musyoka Kumetethya who did 120 feet well and failed to get water. Mr. Ntheeu talks of another individual who has dug 50-feet twice and failed. The cost of digging one foot of a standard well stands at Ksh. 500.

But what is the impact of failed water projects in Mutomo to community participation levels? Mr. Ntheeu says Mutomo people will stop at nothing in pleading with the Water God despite the fact that their earlier efforts have not borne fruits. Mr. Ntheeu regrets that all along they have gotten their development priorities right, but the tried solutions have always missed the point. He says water has always been the first priority. He narrates, with a lot of pain, the history of failed water projects in Mutomo town. First was the Mutomo Water and Soils Conservation project in the early 1980's, followed by the rock-catchment project of DANIDA in the 80's and the 90's. The rock-catchments are only useful during the wet season when water is readily available from other relatively nearer alternative sources. Further more, he observes, the projects lost focus when it came under the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development instead of the Ministry of Water Development, which is more relevant.

Mr. Ntheeu laments that one-half of the enormous resources employed in this project could have been sufficient to address Mutomo water problems if the right technologies were applied. He says the local leaders and communities were not consulted in the choice of the technology. He describes the activity as a mere laboratory experiment.

Ntheeu advises that the only possible and permanent solution to water problems is earth dams. He says the earth dams established by the colonial government (e.g. Matinga in Kyatune) remain major sources of water in some places in the division. He says in every location there are either rivers or/and streams but ironically carrying water to the Indian Ocean. There are cases of broken earth dams attesting to the fact that the water passing through these rivers/streams is a lot and can cure Mutomo water problems. He recommends two earth dams per location.

What waterborne disease mitigation measures do Mutomo residents engage in? Mr. Ntheeu says this is only limited to boiling. However, he points out that the practice is not common.

He advises that safe water does not stop at boiling alone. He cites examples of people washing utensils with unboiled water before serving drinking water, sort of neutralising the boiling effort. He talks of cases of boiled water not properly stored exposing it to further contamination and individuals using unboiled water while brushing their teeth under the pretext that they spit it out.

He also observes that presence of toilets is also uncommon. He attributes this to lack of understanding. Lack of eye opener to force people out of their old fashioned and ignorant practices remain a major issue.

Vendors bring vegetables and fruits for Mutomo market from Kitui (District headquarters) and Kibwezi (in Makueni District) towns.