
UTILITY SERVICES – WATER

by Peter Alcock

No data are believed to be available regarding the water perceptions of blacks newly arrived in urban areas in Natal/KwaZulu. What is known is that the improved availability (volume) of water (not always the reality) is regarded as an additional benefit of translocation to an urban environment. Water quality considerations however, appear to play little or no role in the decision to move, unless water supplies in the rural areas are frequently highly turbid. It should be noted that the primary criterion of water quality, as perceived by blacks, centres on turbidity and not bacteriological quality. There appears to be a general belief that river or dam water for example, is not good quality water in a very broad bacteriological sense, although it is evident that a direct causal relationship between bacteriologically contaminated water and water-borne or water-related disease is not strongly perceived. Such perceptions alter with increasing exposure to western scientific concepts. A previously heightened awareness of the dangers of bacteriologically contaminated water apparent at the time of the cholera epidemic and the water resources drought, has since declined amongst large numbers of rural dwellers.

The **volume** of water available which is a function of the increased number of sources as noted above, is regarded as a positive benefit of urbanisation. It appears that the reality of having to pay for improved water systems in urban areas is not a deterrent to migration. Payment for water cuts across the traditional viewpoint of water (as well as grazing, clay for home building etc.) as a free good available to all. The traditional viewpoint has been changing in the last decade where rural residents have been required to collect money towards spring protection for instance. It is possible that migrants from areas where spring protection has been undertaken to some degree, are

more aware of the need to pay for improved water supplies. The implications of constant or regular payment (where applicable) in urban areas, **vis-a-vis** a once-off payment for spring protection are probably not fully perceived prior to migration from the rural environment.

Within urban areas, the decision to settle at a specific site is usually taken by the senior male of the household. A primary consideration is one of access to transport routes to avoid lengthy walks to and from buses or taxis. The responsibility for water supplies is that of the senior woman of the household assisted by relatives and children. It is quite possible therefore that good access to transport routes and good access to water supplies are somewhat or entirely divergent, depending **inter-alia** on topography and settlement density. Given the generally haphazard pattern of settlement in the informal areas surrounding townships, it is quite possible that both the availability and quality of water supplies are as poor or even worse than in rural districts from which migrants originally came. It does not automatically follow therefore that water systems are better in the urban areas, although it is the expectation thereof which partly contributes to the desire to move from rural districts. Urgent attention is now being given by the RSA/KwaZulu Development Project to improved services in the urban areas surrounding Durban and it is likely that with the passage of time, it would be true to say that better water systems are evident in the urban areas **vis-a-vis** rural districts. It is the children and grandchildren of the present-day migrants accordingly, who from a water supply viewpoint, will benefit most by the past decisions of their parents to move to the urban areas. □