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UCT study delves deeper into Khayelitsha's water woes

Doctoral research from the University of Cape Town (UCT) found that treating water as an economic good creates an unjust distribution pattern in which paying customers are prioritised over those who cannot. Consequently, it socially affects how the residents in informal housing also engage with the city when complaining about a broken communal standpipe.

"Commodification of water goes hand in hand with the capitalist mode of production on natural resources and treats residents as consumers instead of beneficiaries of the state's provision of a fundamental human right," said PhD graduand Minga Mbweck Kongo.

Kongo will graduate on 14 December with a PhD in Social Anthropology.

By framing residents as consumers and users, Kongo said the city creates a hierarchy whereby the residents who meet their obligations by paying for water are prioritised over those who cannot afford to pay for water. "In areas like Khayelitsha, this social structure is complicated by the challenges caused by inadequate infrastructure," he said.

Titled "Water and sociality in Khayelitsha: an ethnographic study", the research looked into how inequalities related to access to water in Cape Town are produced by inequitable development patterns. It also explored the challenges of inadequate water access experienced by residents in less-provisioned areas.

Due to economic challenges, said Kongo, households in the formal area also struggle to meet their financial obligations for water. "They are forcefully equipped with water management devices that make access to water impossible without payment. For those residents in informal areas, the commodification of water enforces a culture of complacency where the residents do not feel entitled to services because they are not consumers. As such, they feel alienated that they cannot hold the local authorities accountable for poor water service delivery because they are not paying for these services."

When water enters the pipe, its social meaning is transformed and takes on a more materialistic status, said Kongo. "Installing water management devices without explaining to the residents what the implications of these devices are, is problematic. In terms of capitalistic value, townships are often treated the same way the suburbs, regarding water management devices, which account for water shortages or water losses. Even though household dynamics are much more complex and distinct in informal settlements and

townships, the same capitalist principle is applied to a household of four or more people," he said.

Then, he went to say, "this principle does not consider that many households in low-income areas are also home to multiple people who rely on the same standpipe. Therefore, those dynamics are dismissed and disproportionately affect how people in informal settlements have access to water."

The findings showed that the residents of formal houses, such as Khwezi, Thembani and Litha Park, which are relatively good in terms of housing infrastructure and living conditions, are seen as paying customers, which influences their service delivery and gets swift attention when they complain.

"Residents in these areas consider themselves as legitimate residents entitled to services because they can afford them, and they view their counterparts in an informal setting such as Ethembeni, Emsindweni, Empholweni, Covid-19 and Endlovini in the same lens of illegality and illegitimacy that the city perceives them," added Kongo.

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