The Zimbabwe Water Forum provides a platform for Government and Development Partners to share international best practices in the water sector between Zimbabwe and other countries. The forum was formed through a partnership between the Ministry of Water Resources Development and Management, the Multi-Donor Trust Fund and the World Bank and is hosted by the World Bank’s Zimbabwe Country Office of the World Bank and the Urban WSS Thematic Group.

Zimbabwe’s new National Water Policy: Responding to Challenges to Create a Foundation for Sustainable Growth

The National Water Policy was approved by the government on December 12, 2012 and publicly launched on World Water Day, March 22, 2013 in Victoria Falls by the Deputy Prime Minister, Ms. T. Khupe. The policy was presented by the Permanent Secretary, MWRDM, Mr. R.J. Chitsiko at the Third Zimbabwe Water Forum held on 30 January, 2013 with Mr Zeb Murungweni, Water Resources Development and Management Specialist and Mr. Ousmane Dione, Sector Manager, East Asia, World Bank as discussants. This policy note focuses on how the National Water Policy responds to the challenges of creating a sound foundation for economic growth to reduce poverty and meet the social needs of Zimbabweans.

Zimbabwe’s economy has traditionally relied heavily on water; historically, high rainfall was reflected in economic prosperity and drier years led to economic downturns (see figure). But since 1996 rainfall was not enough to bolster the economy. The economic difficulties that began in the late 1990s reached crisis proportions over the next decade. Although this economic crisis was precipitated by factors outside of the water sector, it resulted in a collapse of water revenues and a serious deterioration of water infrastructure. When the economy was finally stabilized in early 2009, the water sector needed to recover from these losses so that it could once again support economic growth and deliver the water and sanitation services that communities need. The new National Water Policy was developed to meet this objective.

A recovery phase supported by government and donor grants

The hyperinflation of the 1990s and 2000s led to a collapse in revenues for maintenance, rehabilitation, and even the purchase of water treatment chemicals. The results were inadequate and erratic water supply and sanitation, poor quality of water provided to residents, and badly decaying infrastructure. This neglect ultimately created a deadly cholera epidemic in 2008–2009 that claimed 4,000 lives. An emergency response was put in place to stem the epidemic and prevent further outbreaks: chemicals were purchased and power was restored to key pump stations to get treatment works operational again in
the major urban areas. But it was clear that emergency measures were not enough, and that it would be necessary to create a long-term strategy for recovery of the water system. The new water policy explicitly provides for this recovery phase, recognizing that government grants and donor support will be needed to undertake essential rehabilitation and maintenance work to get existing infrastructure functioning again.

The recovery phase has five main objectives: 1) to arrest the continued deterioration of the water and sanitation assets; 2) to develop practical fast-track strategies to achieve recovery of services; 3) to re-establish the confidence of consumers and water users through the restoration of affordable services; 4) to clarify institutional functions, responsibilities, and accountability; and 5) to restore the financial viability of institutions.

Re-establishing the water resources management function

The allocation of the urban water services function to the Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA) in 2005, combined with a massive reduction of water revenues from commercial irrigators, severely eroded ZINWA’s revenue base. The limited resources available were prioritized for the provision of urban water services, and water resources management activities were greatly reduced. The water policy’s response to this is two-fold: to create a separate ring-fenced national entity to provide water services (the National Water Supply Services Utility)—which would allow ZINWA to return to its original mandate of water resources management—and to reactivate the irrigation sector to increase revenues from the sale of water to irrigators. The policy envisages that, within five years, ZINWA will focus on its core functions of planning, developing, and managing the country’s water resources in accordance with the provisions of the Water Act of 1998.

Responsibility rests with local government

Decentralized urban water supply and sanitation services have been in place in Zimbabwe since the 1890s. Urban WSS services were built on revenues from urban consumers and provided by local authorities through their water and sewerage departments. Urban water and sanitation services were briefly centralized from 2005 to 2009. This period coincided with the economic downturn, and the overall performance of the WSS services was not good. The new policy reallocates responsibility for water and sanitation services to local government (both urban and rural). Local governments may choose to contract with the proposed National Water Supply Services Utility as a water services provider (but they are not obliged to do so), provide services themselves, create utilities, or outsource supply.

South Africa has a similar policy, and experience there has been that local governments are reluctant to contract out their service provision function. The reason for this appears to be that local councils are reluctant to lose control of revenue and staff—and the perceived power and influence that goes with them.

Getting urban water services back onto a sound footing

Historically, Zimbabwe’s Urban WSS services have been driven by principles of high service levels and standards, and universal access, making them unique in Africa. It was mandatory that construction and legal occupation of urban houses be preceded by the development of road, water supply, and sewerage services. This approach ensured that service delivery kept pace with housing developments. Cross-subsidies from wealthier sections of urban areas to poorer sections promoted the principle of universal access. However, like all other sectors of Zimbabwe’s economy, urban water supply and sanitation services faced serious challenges from rising urban population and the economic crisis of the past decade. These challenges led to highly degraded services that pose a serious health threat.

While the new policy reallocates responsibility for urban water services to local government, it also requires authorities to ring-fence revenue from water sales and to set tariffs to
achieve full cost recovery in the normalized phase. During the recovery period, the government will provide interim subsidies to urban authorities through the Public Sector Investment Program and development partner financing that will be coordinated within a Water Sector Investment Framework to finance rehabilitation and expansion of infrastructure.

It will be challenging to accomplish the ring-fencing of water revenues for dedicated use in the water sector without reforms to local government financing. Right now, local governments rely heavily on water revenues to support the costs of providing other municipal services. The political will necessary for tariffs to be set to fully recover costs will be difficult to maintain in an election year.

**The challenge of expanding services in rural areas**

Since independence, Zimbabwe prioritized rural water sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and made significant progress, moving from 5 percent to 43 percent coverage from 1980 to 2009. However, rural WASH development has stagnated since 1990. Maintenance virtually ceased as government failed to provide money for repairs, and development partner funding was not forthcoming. Many systems simply collapsed. In 2004, WASH inventory estimated that 75 percent of the 47,000 handpumps were non-functional. A 2009 report found that 48 percent of Zimbabwe’s rural population did not have a toilet and therefore practiced open defecation, threatening the health of communities and degrading the environment. Continued dependence on external assistance has made services vulnerable to funding cycles, and communities have lost a sense of ownership and control of community infrastructure.

In the new policy, institutional accountability for rural WASH will be made the responsibility of the rural district councils (RDCs), with the central government providing leadership and oversight. Because RDCs are accountable for WSS services at the local level, they will own and manage public rural water and sanitation assets, whether developed by central government, local government, or NGOs.

A dedicated national health education and hygiene knowledge program will be launched to inform rural communities about how and why they can improve basic sanitation.

The water policy allocates responsibility for all aspects of their WASH requirements to rural households. The government will facilitate micro-financing of family-based sanitation services with measures such as loan guarantees for micro-finance providers to reduce the risk of lending for WSS. The government will also finance demonstration latrines for very poor households in the community and will subsidize up to 15 percent of the cost of an upgradeable BVIP latrine.

The policy proposes to stimulate the market for public and private service suppliers in rural areas by bolstering demand. Local leadership, including Water Point Committees and Chiefs will play a key role in community WASH. Rural District Councils will be required to include rural WSS in their annual budgets and commit at least 15 percent of their budgets toward development and management of WASH services.

One of the key challenges to providing rural WSS services is that many rural households simply cannot afford to invest in new facilities. Greater flexibility in service standards will allow these households to move incrementally toward improved facilities.

**Setting affordable standards**

The policy states that “for all urban residents the normal high service standards will be temporarily relaxed during the recovery period. The relaxation will include permitting certain onsite sanitation technologies for plots of a minimum prescribed size to allow housing delivery to recover. This will be followed by a full resumption of high standards once the situation is normalized. The policy is therefore to temporarily lower the technical standards during the recovery phase and upgrade them to the current standards during the normal development phase.”

In the case of rural services, the policy states that “service standards will be reviewed to permit a wide choice among different
technologies so as to match the economic capacity of users. Services standards will enable poor communities to improve their levels of service as their economic circumstances improve.”

Given the historically high levels of service provided in Zimbabwe, it may be difficult for consumers to accept temporarily lower standards, even if they are intended to promote affordability.

**Revitalizing irrigated agriculture**

The total developed irrigated area with formal irrigation infrastructure in Zimbabwe was estimated at between 160,000 and 180,000 hectares in 2000. Informal gardens accounted for an additional 20,000 hectares. In 2007, it was estimated that agriculture accounted for up to 82 percent of the surface water used in Zimbabwe. This figure has declined in recent years. Since 2000, a new group of irrigators, A1 and A2 farmers, has emerged following land redistribution. Many of them share part of the irrigation infrastructure with each other, which may include water sources such as dams and boreholes, transformers, pumps, and infield irrigation infrastructure. In parallel, the Ministry of Agriculture and Mechanization is developing an irrigation policy to address the current realities in the irrigation sector.

Lenders consider the security of tenure of A1 and A2 farms to be inadequate to underpin the risk of investing in rehabilitation or development of irrigation infrastructure.

The government commits itself in the water policy to creating favorable conditions for investment in the agricultural sector as a whole by enhancing the security of tenure on A1 and A2 farms. This will attract investment in irrigation rehabilitation and development, which will restore water use in the agricultural sector and in the process revitalize the operations of ZINWA, Catchment Councils, and Sub-Catchment Councils.

The policy states: “Irrigators themselves will be the main players in irrigation rehabilitation, development and management.” The government will promote concessions for investors in dams and irrigation infrastructure to attract national and international private investors. Targeted grants for irrigation development will be provided to support equity and protection of vulnerable communities where justified, provided that the schemes are financially viable, and that the water users are responsible for recurrent costs. Operation and maintenance costs, including water and energy costs, must be borne by irrigation farmers. Any subsidies to water charges will be targeted and justified.

The success of this policy will depend on the ability of the government to convince potential investors that land tenure is secure.

**Actions to implement the policy**

Action is urgently needed to revitalize and restore WWS services in Zimbabwe. The new water policy is a bold attempt to provide solutions to the difficult and entrenched challenges of the Zimbabwe water sector. The policy acknowledges that it will require more work to set these solutions in motion and lays out a set of actions for rapid and effective implementation including a review and alignment of the relevant legislation, preparation of more detailed cost estimates, and a national implementation plan.