

Privatization and Ensuring Accountability in the Provision of Essential Services: A Case of Water in South Africa

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Abstract : Developing country governments are struggling to meet the basic needs and demands of citizens, especially so for the rural poor. With tightly constrained budgets, these governments have followed the lead of developed countries that have sought to restructure public service delivery through privatization, contracting out, public-private partnerships, and similar reforms. Such reforms in service delivery are generally welcomed when it is believed that private sector partners are better equipped to provide certain services than are governments. With respect to basic and essential services, however, a higher degree of uncertainty and apprehension exists as the focus shifts from simply minimizing the costs of delivering services to broadening access to all citizens. The constitution stipulates that everyone has the right to have access to sufficient food and water. Affordable and/or subsidized water, then, is not a privilege but a basic right of all citizens. Citizens elect political representatives to serve in office, with their sole mandate being to provide for the needs of the citizenry. As governments pass on some amount of responsibility for service delivery to private businesses, these governments must be able to exercise control in order to account to the people for the work done by private partners. This paper examines the legislative and policy frameworks as well as the environment within which PPPs take place in South Africa and the extent to which accountability can be strengthened in this environment. Within the aforementioned backdrop of PPPs and accountability, the constricted focus area of the paper aims to assess the extent to which the provision of clean and safe consumable water in South Africa is sustainable, cost-effective in terms of provision, and affordable to all.

Keywords : privatisation, accountability, essential services, government

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