

In Search of the Right Formula: Public, Private, and Community-Driven Provision of Safe Water in Rwanda and Uganda

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Over the last two decades efforts have been made to find the right formula or formulae for delivering services to poor rural communities. Beginning in the late 1980s, decentralization entailing the dispersal of powers and redistribution of resources and responsibility for public goods provision from the centre to local authorities assumed centre stage in public administration. This was in reaction to what was widely agreed to be the failure by highly centralized governments in developing countries to deliver basic services to their citizens. The failure justified a shift away from centralized public administration systems to their decentralized variant, with democratic decentralisation the strategy of choice for reformist governments across the developing world. Accompanying decentralization as part of the broad good governance promotion were efforts to empower local communities to participate in decision-making processes as a strategy seeking to ensure both accountability of service providers to users, and ownership over public goods and the infrastructure through which they were supplied. There is broad agreement today that the hopes of the advocates and architects of these reforms were not fulfilled. On the contrary, many of the failures and weaknesses they were intended to address proved intractable, mostly for the same reasons highly centralized systems had failed to tackle them. Indeed, it was that very intractability that led to a renewed search for a new right formula and the eventual adoption of privatization or public-private partnerships as an alternative or complement to public and community-driven action. This paper will examine the evolution of these efforts in Rwanda and Uganda and analyse their impact in terms of outcomes in the water sector where private contractors were brought in to mediate between decentralized state and community in the provision of safe water in rural areas. It will argue that, as was the case with democratic decentralization and associated popular participation, privatization or public-private partnership is in itself not the answer to problems of maladministration and accompanying failures in service delivery. It will demonstrate that ultimately the key to effective public goods provision is capacity for vertical and horizontal coordination, inspection and supervision, and the strength of accountability enforcement mechanisms.