

Water ATMs erode worries, hardship for residents of Kenyan slum

By Daniel Wesangula, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.14.16


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A boy returns home carrying a 20-liter container of fresh water, which cost 5 Kenyan shillings (5.5 U.S. cents) to fill from a private tap in the street, in the Kibera slum of Nairobi, Kenya, on March 14, 2015. Photo: AP/Sayyid Azim. BOTTOM: A new business makes it easier to access water through an ATM. UNFCCC/Chris McMorrow

In Nairobi, Kenya, water is a serious business. It can be expensive to buy, and the quality is unpredictable. Mercy Muiruri, a local fruit seller, is part of a growing community of residents who are finding other ways to buy water. At the end of last year, Muiruri started using the community water ATM. Now she buys her water from a machine.

"Now I know the water I use is safe and from a trusted  source. Even my customers will be happy," she says.

Muiruri has been running food businesses in one of Kenya's most populated slums, Mathare, for nearly 20 years. She used to buy her water from local sellers. The sellers aren't trustworthy, and they operate almost like gangs.

"But I could not vouch for its safety. I, like many of my friends, never knew the source of that water. It got to us in 20-liter (5-gallon) plastic containers, and we used it," she says.

In The Past, No Guarantees

Muiruri is part of a water revolution spreading across Kenyan slums. Last year, Nairobi Water and Sewerage Company, the city's main water delivery company, and a Danish water engineering company, launched a partnership. They now work together to develop and run the water ATM machines. The machines change the way that many slum residents receive their water. For a long time, people living in slums had no guarantee of getting safe water they could afford.

The machines operate like an ATM. To buy clean water, users load points on a smart card and then use the card to purchase water. By a simple swipe of their smart card on the ATM's sensor, water is released from the main storage and into a waiting container.

"Apart from knowing we are drinking and using safe water, the vending machines have also helped us cut costs," Muiruri says. "I can put the difference saved back into my business."

Residents Oversee The ATMs

Many households in Kenya live on very little money. The daily income in a slum household is just over a dollar. The average home uses around 100 liters (26 gallons) of water a week. With the introduction of the ATMs, weekly spending on water in Mathare has been reduced. Before families spent 250 Kenyan shillings (Sh), equal to \$2.50. Now, they spend Sh2.50 (2.5 cents).

The Nairobi Water and Sewerage Company has been trying to help the slums for years. The company's efforts to develop a solution to the water supply problem had been ongoing.

A huge benefit of the ATMs, according to the company, is that they are stable. All the company needs to set one up is a safe and secure area, agreed on by the residents. The prices are constant, too. The water ATMs are run and monitored by residents, who make sure that they're taken care of.

Now A Distant Memory

Before the ATMs, gangs that tried to keep the prices high took advantage of residents. Now, the ATMs in Mathare are managed by a village leader and a committee of residents. The smart cards are given out to residents for free.

The ATMs are spread around the slum. For safety and convenience, the ATMs are located in central and well-lit areas, such as near floodlights and along main streets. Their locations make them easy to reach day and night.

Last year, a cholera outbreak swept through the slums and other surrounding areas. Two people died. The cramped slum conditions combined with poor sanitation — including unhygienic water — contributed to the spread of cholera. At the time, Doctors Without Borders, a humanitarian group, was recording 200 new cholera cases every week. Clean water from the ATMs will play a big role in reducing the spread of disease. Residents say they are already noticing the health benefits of the ATMs and new water sources.

Muiruri has been using her clean-water smart card for only four months. However, the memory of dealing with water sellers and the constant worrying over her family's health now seems distant.

"Life has become much easier," she says. "I am also saving on other costs because I spend less on charcoal or kerosene to boil my drinking water. It has already been treated."