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Response to *Under the historian's radar: Local water supply practices in Nairobi* by J.A. Akallah and M. Hård (2020).  
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## **Why we need both the large and the small stories. Response to *Under the historian's radar: Local water supply practices in Nairobi* by J.A. Akallah and M. Hård (2020).**

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In their WaA (13:3) article about the history of water supply in Nairobi, historians Jethron A. Akallah and Mikael Hård launch serious criticism on scholars that do not pay sufficient attention to local initiatives beyond the large networks. In particular, they argue, historical accounts of urban water supply tend to focus on large-scale systems only, while the efforts of ordinary people providing services for themselves fall "under the historian's radar". Not only does this "[render] invisible some users who are not served by the system", moreover, it "perpetuates these deficiency histories" picturing the "centralised model of water provision as the norm".

The radar operator can only tell the story of the sky. The historian on the other hand, must decide what story to tell based on available empirical material. Akallah and Hård tell a different story. But that does not mean, as their text implies, that other stories are false. I am one of those scholars that come under fire in the article, with four of my earlier publications (from 2009 to 2017) cited and criticised. It is always nice when one's work is being read and cited. This *Response* does not so much concern defending my own work, as discussing some propositions put forth by Akallah and Hård. In essence, there is a need for both the large-scale and the small-scale water provision models, and consequently, we need meaningful narratives on both scales.

Before discussing their more important propositions, let me briefly correct and clarify three points of criticism relating to my earlier works.

First, in my doctoral dissertation I set out to present a "history-based critique of the development of systems for urban water provision in two East African countries" (Nilsson, 2011:7). The story I tell is definitely about the state actors and their piped centralised systems, although I have acknowledged alternative and informal service provision as part of the picture. However, my focus was to analyse and understand the development of precisely these large-scale system over time, not to write the kind of "full-fledged analysis of past and contemporary events" arriving at "a fuller understanding of the role of water in the urban landscape" that Akallah and Hård ask for. Their criticism in that regard – toward myself and others – is a bit like beating the goat for not being a cow.

Second, Ezekiel Nyangeri Nyanchaga and I (2009) suggest a period of "state hegemony" between 1946 and 1985 in Kenya. However, our claim in that paper only relates to the role of the state as expressed in the water legislation. We did not use it as a real-world characterisation of the urban water provision in Kenya, which in reality always was a patchwork of different private and public solutions just as Akallah and Hård, and many others, suggest.

Third and last, the two authors specifically discredit the LTS, Large Technical Systems approach (Hughes, 1983), which was (and is) an important analytical lens in my work. In my dissertation, I

concluded that the urban water supply systems in Uganda and Kenya *only partly matched* the typical progression stages of establishment, expansion, maturity and stagnation. "Some things do not add up", I concluded (2011:68), but anyway found that LTS could be useful. I still hold this argument valid, for the following reasons.

LTS is a descriptive approach, not a predictive or normative theory. It was developed to describe the growth dynamics and system logics of large infrastructures like railways, electricity, roads, water, gas, etc during a particular historical moment in the Western society. These systems were exported to today's low-income regions as part of a colonial expansion where European powers transferred domestic infrastructure and service systems, being instruments of modernisation, 'civilisation' and control (McFarlane, 2008; Kooy and Bakker, 2008; Nilsson, 2016). LTS can therefore say something about the logics and relations of these systems, actors and institutions also in today's Kenya, but it cannot predict their evolution. After decolonisation, much hope and capital was invested by governments, various experts and the donor community into centralised systems, but with limited success. Applying LTS to unpack and understand these systems is not about being "seduced" by theory as Akallah and Hård put it. It is about finding explanations also for failure, for the trajectories not followed, for the mismatch between the goals and the outcomes.

This is why Pär Blomkvist and I returned to the urban water supply of Nairobi yet again armed with LTS in our 2017 WaA paper. We looked at Nairobi water supply over time from the system-builder's point of view and identified the misalignments between the local socio-political environment and the inherent logics of large technical systems. This enabled us to identify inconsistencies and to adapt the analytical framework to low-income regions. I do not agree with Akallah and Hård in saying that the usefulness of LTS "is highly limited when applied to phenomena in the Global South". As a scholar you must always be aware of the limitations of your framework and never put theory before empirics. When analysing large infrastructures the LTS can be useful if applied in a curious, explorative and adaptive way.

However, LTS is not a good framework for writing the history of water provision in Nairobi from a citizen perspective. When trying to tell a story of how ordinary people – and especially marginalised people in under-served areas – have accessed water, it will not suffice to describe the large infrastructures, evolution of water law, utility organisation or donor policies. Historians have already for decades deviated from the tradition of Grand Narratives and ventured into social history and microhistory, bringing much more life and nuance to our understanding of the past. The way we understand our past also influences what we think is right and what we think is possible. Akallah and Hård are on to something important. By painting a richer picture of the past, including the experiences of citizens beyond the piped network, we might also complement and diversify the false imagery of modern large-scale technology as the only solution for the future.

In reality, the large technical systems for water, energy, transport etc, are just one of the options for a large proportion of urban dwellers in low-income regions. It does not make sense to only embrace state-led centralised development embodying a modern infrastructure ideal, and there is a growing need to think in terms of more heterogeneous infrastructure configurations (Lawhon et al., 2018; Sseviiri et al., 2020). The everyday experimentation by millions of ordinary people, communities and actor groups outside the state realm is a huge source of knowledge for finding solutions that are affordable, resilient and adapted to local conditions. So far, the governments, donors and utility companies have been slow to adapt to local innovation and they need to pay more attention to exploring alternatives, e.g. by diversification and "ambidextrous" approaches (van Welie et al., 2019; Blomkvist et al., 2020; Nilsson and Blomkvist, 2020). Perhaps by telling and hearing stories grounded in alternative practices from the past, large-scale actors may start seeing alternative strategies as more legitimate.

The biggest problem in this endeavour is the source material. How do you write the history of what is not on record? The time I have spent in official archives in the UK, Sweden, Kenya and Uganda has made me painfully aware of how skewed these repositories are. They mainly document events that were of

direct interest to the colonial and central government's operations. Akallah and Hård's answer is: go out and ask the people! They tap into an oral history tradition which has been more about documenting individual life stories than depicting larger societal trends. The six interviews they base their paper upon is a small number of voices to recite the past of a large city – but that is not the point. Their key contribution lies in contrasting the large narratives with the small ones. Together, the multiple narratives brings out a more nuanced and diverse picture of how people have organised service provision, sometimes in cooperation with the authorities, sometimes not.

In 2019, geographer Henrik Ernstson and I presented an oral history study from the informal settlement Acholi Quarters on the outskirts of Kampala, Uganda. Our interviews with eleven elders in this area showed the diversity and ingenuity of the inhabitants, the dynamic relationships to the state and its infrastructures, and how it has shifted over generations. We also saw that government large-scale systems affected the settlement and the options available quite substantially, even when they provided minimal or fragile service. The infrastructure configuration was (and is) indeed heterogeneous, and the state-led services are themselves part of the wide range of 'alternatives'.

In conclusion, we need to understand both the large systems and the every-day practices of ordinary people, as well as how these storylines come together. We need both the big stories and the small ones; from the past, from the present, and for the future.

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