

Lessons From The War Against Prepaid Water Meters

The Struggle Against Silent Disconnections Continues...

Three years have passed since the first prepaid water meters were installed in Phiri in August 2003. This report is the result of a research project on the impact of the prepaid water meters on the community of Phiri. While residents came into sometimes violent conflict with Johannesburg Water in resisting the installation of the meters, open resistance to the system appears to have been contained. The research finds a number of reasons why this is the case, including the intimidation of residents by the threat of criminal charges and cut-offs, and the buying-out of resistance with the offer to scrap arrears when signing up for a prepaid meter.

The research was conducted by the research subcommittee of the Anti Privatisation Forum.

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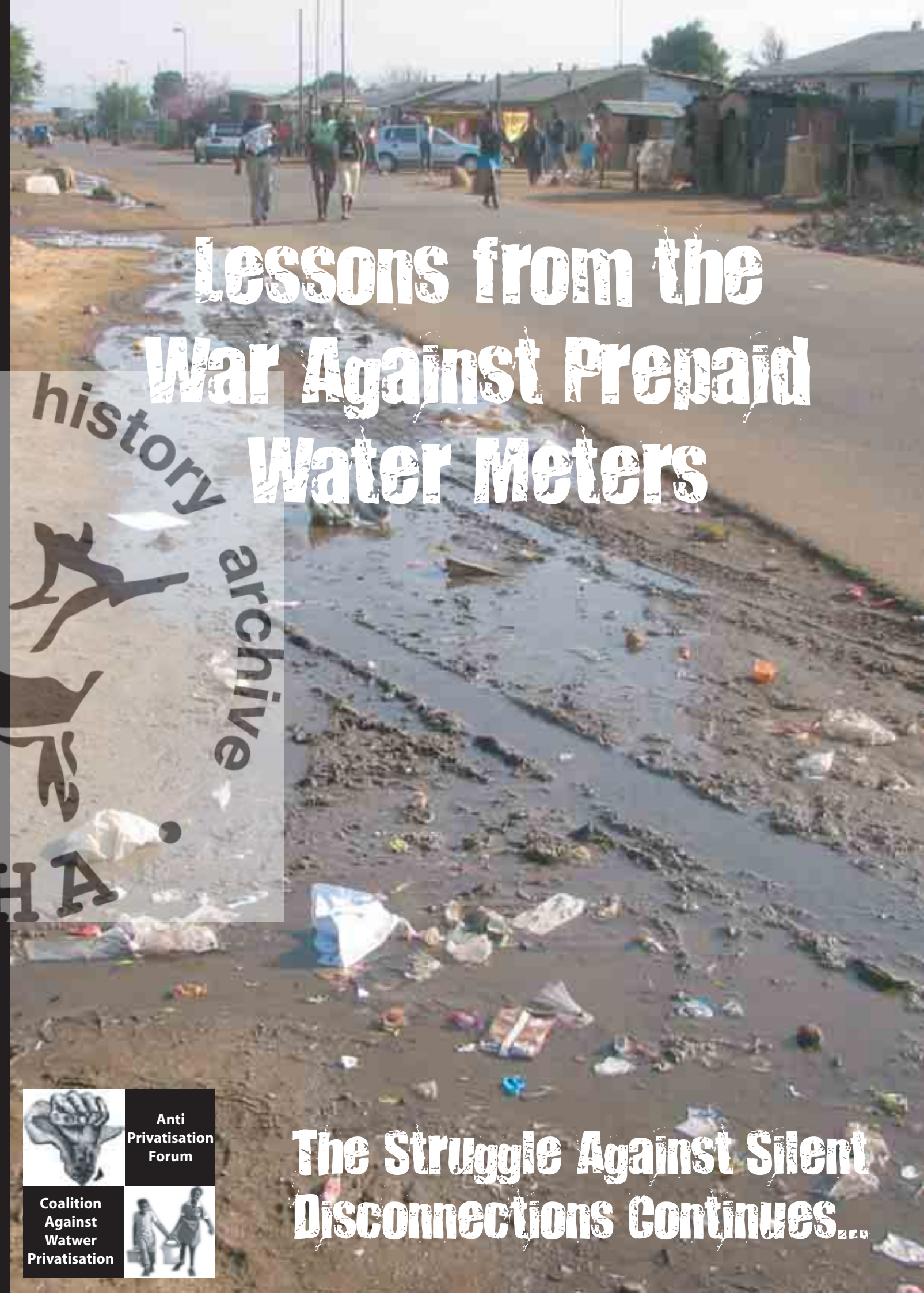
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Lessons from the War Against Prepaid Water Meters

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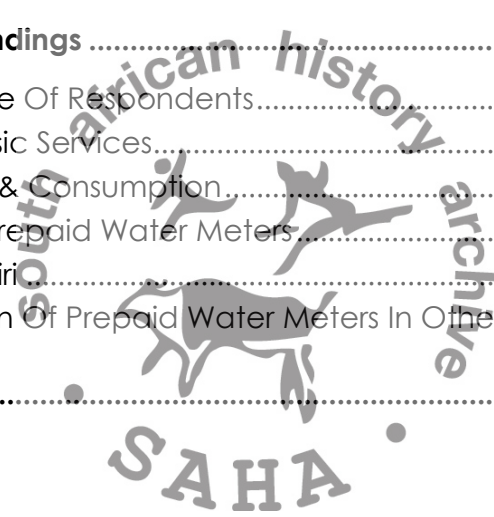
The Struggle Against Silent Disconnections Continues...

A report by the Coalition Against Water Privatisation & the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), documenting the findings of a research project conducted between 2005 and 2006 to understand the effects of prepaid water meters on the lives and struggles of the residents of Phiri, Soweto. The project served as a follow-up to previous research, conducted in 2003, the findings of which are contained in a report entitled 'The Struggle Against Silent Disconnections: Prepaid Meters & The Struggle For Life In Phiri, Soweto'.

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1. INTRODUCTION



Attempts at introducing 'cost recovery practices' in the delivery of water and electricity have been met with widespread resistance from poor communities across South Africa. In Johannesburg, the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) and its twenty-two community affiliates are evidence of organised resistance against such practices, emerging, in many cases, in the first instance, against water and electricity cut-offs. At the height of struggles, Johannesburg Water and the municipality introduced the prepaid water meter as a means of circumventing the problems associated with cut-offs as a punitive measure for non-payment. With the prepaid meter, individuals would not be able to access water without paying for it upfront. In this manner, the accumulation of debt would not be permitted, and the responsibility for securing access would become the individual paying customer's and no longer that of the state and/or private company.

In 2003, quoting the 'success' of a pilot project in Stretford, Extension 4, Orange Farm¹, Johannesburg Water and the municipality launched Operation Gcina 'manzi (Operation 'Save Water'), through which prepaid water meters would be installed in all households in Soweto, beginning with Phiri, in an effort to get residents of Soweto to 'save water'. The prepaid system was sold to residents as the only means by which residents would be able to fix their leaking pipes and/or to get flush toilets, and as a necessary means of encouraging residents to 'budget properly' and to 'make efficient use' of water.

Three years have passed since the first prepaid water meters were installed in Phiri in August 2003. In this time, residents have come into (sometimes violent) conflict with Johannesburg Water contractors and officials, private security, and the police as they tried to resist the installation of what they saw as curtailments to their basic rights and the meeting of their basic needs. Over time, arrests, cut-offs, fines and threats have quietened residents, and Johannesburg Water today celebrates its flagship project for Soweto, Operation Gcina 'manzi, by pointing to its 'successes' in Phiri. These 'successes' have piqued the interest of the Nairobi Water Board, whose representatives visited Soweto to learn about Operation Gcin 'manzi in September 2005. Huge billboards at the entrance to Phiri proclaim that 90 billion litres of water have been saved by residents. Business at the Johannesburg Water site office in Phiri is steady as residents visit the cashier with wads of past cash slips in hand showing their previous purchases of water. And, the buying and selling of water seems to have become a part of life as usual in Phiri, Soweto.

But, in the Phiri Concerned Residents' Forum (PCRF), the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC), the Coalition Against Water Privatisation and the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), we have continued to argue that prepaid water meters are not a choice that the majority have made, and that they have instead been forced on the poorest residents in such a manner that

¹ For a critical investigation into the effects of prepaid water meters on the lives of residents of Stretford, Extension 4, Orange Farm, see Coalition Against Water Privatisation et al., *Nothing For Mahala: The Forced Installation of Prepaid Water Meters In Stretford, Extension 4, Orange Farm*, 2003.

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they have had little choice but to accept them as a means of accessing a resource absolutely necessary for life. As struggle against the prepaid water meters has grown in Phiri and the rest of Soweto, Johannesburg Water and the municipality have had to find new ways of introducing a system that residents have clearly been against. In addition to arrests and the general criminalisation of legitimate struggles against the prepaid water meters, the municipality has recently introduced changes to its indigent management policy, permitting residents who come forward with proof that they are 'poor enough' to have their debts scrapped in exchange for signing onto prepaid systems of delivery for water and electricity.

In spite of resistance, the municipality seems committed to its rollout of prepaid meters through the completion of Operation Gcina 'manzi, launched in 2003. This is evident in its recent acquisition of a loan of R320 million from the Agence Francaise de Developpement (AFD), for the purchase of prepaid water meters. By January 2005, Johannesburg Water was claiming the success of its 'pilot phase' in Phiri and embarking on expansion of the prepaid operation to 13 adjacent areas, including Dlamini, Mapetla, Tladi, Jabulani, Dlamini Ext, Moroka, Molapo, Jabavu, Mofolo South, Naledi and Emdeni. It is now clear that prepaid water meters are in the plans for water delivery in the rest of Johannesburg and Gauteng.

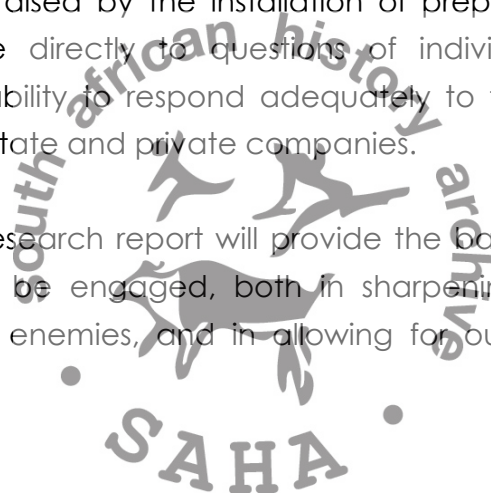
These developments certainly pose important questions and challenges for struggle against the prepaid system. While organisations may continue to be vocal against the further installation of prepaid water meters, the reality is that for the majority of residents there is little choice but to sign onto the system. Amongst our own members, activists belong to families that have been divided over the installation of a prepaid water meter at their homes. The fact that this struggle has unfolded on the terrain of life i.e. over access to a basic necessity for life, has meant that the choice to struggle and to resist the prepaid water meter has resulted in a lower quality of life for some. This has made the choice to struggle against the system difficult for many, and made the work of organisations fighting against the system more difficult. But while the struggle in Phiri may be at a low, resistance in other areas of Soweto, such as White City, Jabavu and Dlamini, has begun to shape new

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approaches to collectivising the act of bypassing the prepaid water meter. It is hoped that this report will offer lessons for these new spaces in which Johannesburg Water and the municipality are attempting to entrench the logic of payment for water.

As Johannesburg Water and the municipality strengthen their resolve to take forward the roll-out of prepaid water meters, the Coalition and the APF also prepare for another terrain of struggle in this war against water privatisation, that of the courts. This report has been prepared in the context of a constitutional case being undertaken by the Coalition against the prepaid meter as a violation of the individual's basic right to water. As activists look to the court case as a means to revive struggle at a local level, it is important that other questions raised by the installation of prepaid water meters be engaged that relate directly to questions of individual and collective resistance, and our ability to respond adequately to the changing tactics and strategies of the state and private companies.

It is hoped that this research report will provide the basis on which some of these questions may be engaged, both in sharpening our critiques and struggles against our enemies, and in allowing for our own development through self-critique.



2. BACKGROUND TO THIS RESEARCH PROJECT



At the start of the struggle against the installation of prepaid water meters in Phiri in 2003, the Coalition Against Water Privatisation and the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) came together with the Phiri Concerned Residents Forum (PCRF) to conduct research into the socio-economic conditions of residents of Phiri, their perceptions about prepaid water meters, and their experiences with regard to the installation of the meters taking place at the time of the research project.

Against claims by Johannesburg Water that 98% of Phiri residents had chosen to sign onto the prepaid system of water delivery and were happy with the new system, the research showed that over 95% of respondents in a survey of 174 households stated that they had felt deceived by Johannesburg Water and their local councillors, and that they had not been properly consulted with regard to the installation of the prepaid meters. The results of this project

were published in a report entitled, *The Struggle Against Silent Disconnections: Prepaid Meters & The Struggle For Life in Phiri, Soweto* (2004).

The report was also significant in that it highlighted the fears of Phiri residents about the impact that the prepaid water meters would have on their lives. Residents interviewed expressed fears that they would not have enough water for their essential needs, that they would have to begin reducing their usage of water for certain tasks (e.g. flushing the toilet), that potential for conflict would increase (within households, between neighbours, and in communities), and that certain traditions and cultural practices would be undermined as the large amounts of water required for them to be successful would be limited due to an inability to pay.

As the Coalition and the APF, we argued, based on the research findings that residents would mobilise and organise collectively against the prepaid water meters, and that bypassing the water meter would become a generalised tactic of resistance.

Three years after the initial resistance in Block A, Phiri, and the results of our study, Johannesburg Water still insists that the majority of residents are happy with the prepaid water system, and is rolling ahead with its installation programme in the rest of Phiri and Soweto. Other townships in Gauteng are also being targeted for the prepaid programme. Collective resistance against prepaid water is at its lowest in Phiri and Soweto. This research project arose out of the need to follow up on assertions and claims made in our earlier research report, in an attempt to understand the effects of the prepaid water system on the lives of people in Phiri and to understand what has happened to struggles against the system since 2003. Taking place at a time when Johannesburg Water and the Johannesburg municipality seem strengthened in their resolve to take forward the prepaid water system, and at a time when the management of Johannesburg's water delivery by Suez Lyonnaise Des Eaux is under review, this research project is also a contribution to the campaigns being developed by the APF and the Coalition against the further erosion of the quality of people's lives by prepaid water meters.

While the 2003 research project recorded the history of struggle between residents and Johannesburg Water and the local municipality and measured the attitudes of residents to the prepaid meters prior to their installation (i.e. before any real lived experiences with the meters), this project returned to Phiri to ask how residents have experienced life with prepaid water meters and whether the prepaid meters have been meeting their water needs in an improved manner. It also asked what the effects of the prepaid system and the tactics employed for their installation have had on struggle.

2.1 Broad Aims Of The Research Project

- To find out what the experiences of people living in Phiri had been since the installation of prepaid water meters i.e. what had the impact of the prepaid system been on the lives of people?
- To understand and record the experiences of struggle against the prepaid system of delivery in Phiri.
- To understand how people were living with the prepaid system.
- To understand the tactics and strategies of Johannesburg Water and the municipality in their attempts to enforce the prepaid system of water delivery.

An additional aim of the project would be to build capacity within the APF and Coalition for the conduct of research. The project would therefore have to include a significant skills training component, to be shaped and delivered by more skilled and experienced members of the APF Research Subcommittee.

2.2 Research Questions

The following broad questions guided the development of more detailed research tools:

- Are prepaid water meters meeting the needs of people living in Phiri, Soweto today?
- Do prepaid water meters represent any major changes for the quality of life experienced by people from the past?
- What challenges do prepaid water meters present for struggle against the commodification of basic services in South Africa?

2.3 Research Methodology & Process

This project took the form of collective, participatory research conducted by a group of activists from the APF Research Subcommittee. While the thirty member subcommittee helped to shape and guide the overall project, a core group of twelve activists took responsibility for implementing decisions taken in the collective, for conducting key aspects of the research, and for ensuring the completion of the project.

At the outset, a general workshop was held (in October 2005) to which all interested APF and Coalition members were invited to debate and flesh out an overall research plan. At this workshop, participants also received introductory training on research to enable them to participate meaningfully in the discussions towards shaping a research plan. This workshop resulted in an overall research design for the project, as well as an operational plan for its delivery. It was agreed that the project would employ the following research methods:

Secondary & Archival Research

Sourcing & reading of newspaper and internet articles, official archives and organisational records to establish the latest developments around water delivery and struggles for free water in Johannesburg, Gauteng and the rest of the country. Noting that the previous research report contains much of this information, not too much time would be spent on this form of research this time around.

Questionnaire-Based Household Survey

A questionnaire would be developed in a participatory manner by APF and Coalition activists interested in the project, to measure the experiences of Phiri residents of the prepaid water meters. A sample would be chosen representative of the different household types in Phiri and greater Soweto. The questionnaire would be workshoped with and administered by a small group of APF and Coalition activists.

Focus Group Discussion

As the questionnaire would be targeting those households with prepaid water meters, it was felt that it would be important to understand the experiences of those living without prepaid water meters i.e. those who had resisted the prepaid system. It was also acknowledged that a questionnaire could not be relied on to get information related to issues of resistance against the system as individuals would be afraid to have their instances of resistance (read illegality) recorded as they could be opening themselves up to potential punishment. It was felt that a focus group discussion would better serve the aim of understanding resistance in the area, and that it should be held with members of the community who had chosen to refuse to be signed onto the prepaid water system. On 13 July 2006, therefore, members of the PCRf and the SECC, as well as ordinary residents known to have resisted the prepaid water system, were invited to participate in a focus group discussion to understand the nature of resistance against the prepaid water system and its consequences for those who have chosen not to buy into the logic of payment for water. Seven women and two men participated in the discussion.

Participant Observation

General discussions and debates within the Coalition, PCRf, APF and its other affiliates would also be a source of information through observation and recording by members of the Research Subcommittee.

Interviews With Johannesburg Water

While the initial research plan sought to include an in-depth interview with a member of Johannesburg Water's senior management team, verbal and written attempts to secure this interview failed. The company's head offices were being moved at the time of the research with such resulting chaos that no manager would respond to inquiries. Instead, a visit to the Phiri office of Johannesburg Water was conducted by two members of the APF Research Subcommittee on 13 July 2006. Without revealing their true identities, the researchers were able to source some significant information in the short time during which they were in contact with Johannesburg Water staff, conducting short informal interviews with a male cashier and a young woman collecting faulty water tokens and complaints.

Sourcing Of Information From Affiliates

APF affiliates would also be asked to make submissions to the Research Subcommittee about the state of prepaid water initiatives in their communities.

The above decisions, taken in the first workshop, were compiled in a project proposal that was then circulated amongst office bearers of the APF and members of the Coalition for comment. Once broad agreement on the nature of the project was reached, a second workshop was held (in April 2006) to finalise the research plan, to develop the research tools (questionnaire-based survey and focus groups), and to begin training a group of activists to conduct the fieldwork. Another small workshop was held to finalise the questionnaire amongst those administering it, and to practice and test the administration of the questionnaire. The final questionnaires were used to conduct interviews with residents in Phiri from 15-20 May 2006.

Researchers worked in pairs to allow for proper recording of information, and to ensure that problems regarding language could potentially be avoided i.e. researchers paired off with people who spoke different languages to those spoken by them. In general, researchers felt that this was a good way of approaching the task as it gave them greater confidence in the field, and

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allowed for a sharing of the task at hand in a manner that anticipated and countered potential problems.

The focus group discussion took place at the Phiri Library on 13 July 2006, and was facilitated by APF Research Subcommittee members who were not from Soweto. Discussions were recorded and typed up for collective analysis in the final workshop (see below).

Collation and capturing of the data from the questionnaires was done by a small group of APF Research Subcommittee members, and the final data was sorted and prepared for collective analysis over two days in a final workshop (17-18 July 2006). At this workshop, members of the Coalition and the APF Research Subcommittee received basic training on how to analyse different forms of data. Through facilitated small group work and broader discussion, data from the secondary research process, the questionnaires, and the focus group discussion were shared and collectively analysed. At the end of this workshop, a structure and focuses for this report were discussed and agreed on, and a small group elected to write up the findings for this report.

While the research process itself has thrown up several issues for further debate and discussion within the APF and Coalition about how we conduct research, this will be the subject of a separate process of evaluation through the Research Subcommittee. This report does not, therefore, deal with the problems related to the process of conducting participatory research of this nature and scale. It is, however, a representation of the main findings of this process. In spite of the problems encountered in the process, this project has been a general success in bringing activists from different backgrounds and experiences together in collectively shaping and conducting a research project that has yielded results that will now help in shaping the tactics and strategies employed in the struggle against prepaid water meters in Johannesburg and Gauteng.

3. MAIN RESEARCH FINDINGS



3.1 General Profile Of Respondents

A total of 166 households in Phiri were surveyed, using the collectively developed questionnaire, representing 15% of the total number of households in Phiri (1110). 13 households from Phiri Extension, a part of Phiri with privately-owned and built houses, representing a more middle-class resident, were included in the sample to ensure a proportional representation of the two major kinds of households found in Phiri (privately-built and owned houses; and Council-built houses - now mainly owned by residents). Houses in Phiri Extension (32) represent 3% of the overall number of households in Phiri. The 13 households that we interviewed represented 8% of our overall sample. Individuals were approached at their homes between 09h00 and 17h00 from 15-20 May 2006. Every seventh house was approached to ensure a random sample.

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75% of respondents were female and 25% male. The majority of respondents (49%) were mothers, 15% were fathers, 10% were grandparents, 26% were children, and 1 percent were siblings.

30% of respondents were over the age of 60, and 23% fell within that age group considered to be youth in South Africa i.e. 18-35 years of age.

84% of those interviewed said that they were unemployed, with only 16% being employed. Of the total number of people interviewed, 74% identified themselves as the breadwinners of their households. Only 13% (22 respondents) of those who said that they were breadwinners were employed.

Household Size

Including the number of people living in backyard dwellings, the average household size derived from our sample was 7².

Socio-Economic Profile of Households

Our findings confirm that Phiri is a part of Soweto with high levels of unemployment and poverty. 49% of respondents stated that no one in their households was employed, with 33% having 1 person employed. Our figures also suggest an overall unemployment rate for the entire area surveyed of 87%.

The majority of households survived on a monthly income of between R500 and R1000, with just 2 households (1%) enjoying a monthly income of more than R3,500.

² This is significantly lower than the figure derived in our previous research project which was an average of 16 members per household. One possible reason for part of the decrease could be that several families have, since 2003, been relocated to Braamfischerville, leaving homes previously occupied by two families now with just one family. However, this cannot be a sufficient reason for such a big discrepancy. The only other significant difference between this project and the previous one is that APF Research Subcommittee members have done all the capturing and counting in this project whereas these functions were outsourced to Omnidata with the last project.

Category	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
No Income	1	1
Less Than R500	27	17
R500-R1000	87	53
R1000-R1500	22	13
R1500-R2000	11	7
R2000-R2500	6	4
R2500-R3000	3	2
R3000-R3500	4	2
More Than R3500	2	1

Table: Monthly Household Income n = 163

75% of households relied on some form of state provision for survival (pensions, childcare grants, foster care grants, or disability grants). Only 36% of households enjoyed some income from salaries. Another significant source of money (for 15% of households) was that of rental income (from letting out backyard rooms or ground space to tenants).

Category	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Salaries	59	36
Rent	26	16
Pension	79	11
Child care grant	33	20
Foster care grant	4	2
AIDS grant	2	1
Disability grant	6	4
Self employment	15	9
Other	2	1

Table: Sources Of Household Income n = 166

84% of households indicated that they had at least 1 school-going child. With the introduction of school fees and the increasing costs of text books,

uniforms and so on, households with such high levels of unemployment and low incomes are sure to struggle to send children to school. Instead, the costs of education would put additional strain on poor households.

Also significant is the fact that 39% of households had at least 1 sick person to care for. In a context of high unemployment and low household incomes, a sick member of the household can put enormous strain on household resources and energies. A high dependence on state grants at a time when the state is itself 'tightening its belt' and trying to cut on areas of social spending, also means that many households live in increasingly vulnerable and precarious situations.

3.2 Access To Basic Services

Housing

The majority of respondents (97%) said that they had lived in their formal houses for over ten years, with 96% owning these houses.

Electricity

The majority of households (75%) enjoyed access to electricity via the prepaid system, with 25% having access to normal metered electricity.

Sanitation

Striking is the finding that only 15% of households in our sample had flush toilets inside their dwellings. The rest had flush toilets outside their homes.

Water

While we chose to survey those households with access to water via the prepaid system, residents of Phiri are said to be given a 'choice' between the

prepaid system and a standpipe outside one's yard. With a standpipe, however, one is unable to have access to a flush toilet, and heavy fines (up to R1,500) have been imposed on residents who have connected their households to these standpipes. In addition, in order to qualify for the Municipal Services Subsidy Scheme (or the indigency policy) residents have to sign onto prepaid systems of delivery for both water and electricity. In this manner poor people's 'choices' are being limited with regard to access to basic services like water. Our findings also reflect that residents have come to accept and internalise the logic of paying for water through the prepaid system as their choices over how they survive and live have become restricted over time.

While our previous research study noted that the majority of Phiri residents were in debt as they had not been paying for water, the results of this study point to the fact that residents are today indeed buying water through the prepaid system. Through the imposition of the prepaid system through a narrowing of 'choices' for the poor at the very basic level of survival and life, accompanied by lessons of 'careful budgeting' and 'the efficient use of water', our findings suggest that residents of Phiri have come to accept and live with prepaid water meters. While they might still hate them, they are learning to live with them.

Free Water

The majority of households (96%) reflected that they received their free 6 kilolitres of water through the prepaid system without hassle every month. However, 6 households said that they did not receive their expected free water. Noting that Johannesburg Water and government have sold the prepaid system as an efficient means of delivering free water, even such a small number of households unable to access this water, is relevant. It would also be important for these households to be followed up as their right to free basic water is being violated, and they could be assisted in trying to correct this.

Residents also complained that the billing system is confusing as charges for water and sanitation are not separated, and there is no way of telling whether the free 6 kilolitres of water is being used for water or sanitation needs. This makes it difficult to plan and budget effectively, as Johannesburg Water claims that it is helping residents to do.

3.3 Water Usage & Consumption

Our findings indicate that an average of 7 individuals make use of the free 6 kilolitres of water provided every month. While this figure is significantly lower than our previous research findings, which reflected an average of 16 people needing to survive on this small amount of water, our findings still suggest that this amount of 6 kilolitres is insufficient for the basic needs of a household. Instead, households surveyed in this project spent, on average, between R20-R50 per month on water. With the cost of water being R5.36 per kilolitre, this translates into each household having consumed, on average, between 8.7 and 15.3 kilolitres of water per month, over and above the free 6 kilolitres.

Noting that the average household size was 7, we can deduce an average per capita usage of between 1.2 and 2.1 kilolitres per month, over and above the free 6 kilolitres.

Findings also indicate that respondents used water for their essential needs e.g. washing, cooking, cleaning, and flushing the toilet, and less so for more secondary tasks e.g. gardening and washing cars.

Another striking finding is the fact that the majority of households (82%) did not have bathrooms inside their dwellings. 97% said that they did not have showers. This is significant given that Johannesburg Water's propaganda assumes that residents of Phiri have this basic level of infrastructure necessary in order both to waste water and to save water.

Running out of water cannot be pleasant for anyone. Imagine running out of water as a matter of course every month. Our findings show that households

surveyed ran out of water, on average, once a month, with the highest recorded response being eight times a month. Each time one runs out, a trip to the nearest seller of water units is required. If one happens to run out at night, unfortunately one will only be able to buy more units for water once the outlets reopen the next morning.

In a context where the purchase of water necessitates restricting the use of it, cultural ceremonies, weddings and funerals have begun to suffer. In our survey, 28% of respondents said that they had needed water for funerals in the last year, and a number of respondents raised the need for water during weddings, ancestral ceremonies, unveilings of tombstones, church services, and birthday parties unprompted in the course of interviews.

In addition, workshop discussions highlighted the fact that restricting water usage to covering essential needs has also prevented residents from cultivating food gardens and from running small businesses e.g. car washes or hairdressing salons. While government has spent much time and money on encouraging individuals to become 'self-reliant' through providing for their own nutrition and/or by starting their own small businesses, the introduction of the duty to pay for the water that will be required for these tasks has prevented many residents from pursuing these paths.

Our previous research report argued that having to control the household's consumption of water would result in greater potential for conflict and added responsibilities for women in the household, as their traditional roles of care-giving and tending to the reproductive needs of the household would now have to include the task of accessing water. Our results certainly prove that women have taken on this task in many households. The majority of respondents (64%) said that the mother of the household controlled the usage of water, with 13% saying that the father played this role. Only 6% of respondents said that everyone in the household shared this role. In addition, 49% said that the mother of the household bought water units. 18% said that fathers bought units, and just 6% said that the household collectively bought units.

In the focus group discussion as well as workshop discussions, participants raised additional problems faced by women in households as a result of the need to restrict water consumption. One example is the fact that women require additional water when menstruating, and are often left in embarrassing situations when needing to limit water use e.g. for toilet flushes. In addition to their biological needs, women are also expected to provide for the basic reproductive needs of households e.g. washing, cleaning, and cooking. Participants highlighted the fact that the need for the provision of water for these tasks was often not seen or acknowledged, with its responsibility falling on the shoulders of women. In households where members were sick, the duty to care for them often falls on women, again requiring them to find sources of additional money for these additional water needs.

A related problem is the large number of faults reported with meters and water tokens. During a visit to the Johannesburg Water office, researchers observed a large number of faulty tokens being brought in by residents for repair or replacement. Replacement of a token is costly at R80 for a new token. While the staff member interviewed assured researchers that all faults were fixed within 24 hours of being reported, and that a call centre attended to problems around the clock, residents report great disruptions to their lives when such faults occur. Another common problem is that of flat batteries. The meters are powered by batteries, and it is the responsibility of Johannesburg Water to charge these. Residents report that the recharging of these batteries takes time, and households are completely cut off from any water supply during these periods of waiting on Johannesburg Water.

3.4 Attitudes To Prepaid Water Meters

One of the strongest findings of our previous research project was that the majority of Phiri residents felt that they had not had a choice in signing onto the prepaid water system. However, Johannesburg Water continues to assert that the majority of residents have signed onto the system voluntarily and are happy with it. This project, conducted three years since the launch of

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Operation Gcina 'manzi, continues to record the dissatisfaction amongst residents with the prepaid water meters. However, they are considerably lower than our last project's findings, suggesting that people are beginning to learn to live with the meters. While in the previous report, 95% of respondents said that "government is forcing us to take the prepaid water meter," and 97% said that "government is unfair to come with prepaid for poor people," our more recent project reflects that in response to the question, "Did you have a choice about whether to get the prepaid water meter?" 68% of respondents answered "no". While significantly lower than the previous figures, the latter is still significantly high enough to counter Johannesburg Water's claims that the majority of residents in Phiri agreed to the prepaid water system. In addition, other responses continue to confirm that residents were not sufficiently consulted in the process of installing the prepaid water system in Phiri (see table below). Also striking is the finding in this research project that 60% of residents are not happy with their prepaid water meters while 40% are.

	AGREE	DISAGREE	n
My household situation has improved as a result of the prepaid water meter.	16%	84%	149
My household situation has become worse as a result of the prepaid water meter.	82%	18%	146
Most of us in Phiri do not like the prepaid water meters.	85%	15%	142
The prepaid water meters have resulted in women having to do more work.	71%	29%	136
The prepaid water meters have resulted in people stealing from each other in Phiri.	55%	45%	135

Table: Attitudes To Prepaid Water Meters In Phiri

3.5 Struggle In Phiri

While large numbers of residents came together to physically resist the installation of the meters in the early days of Operation Gcina 'manzi, leading to the formation of the PCRf, over time, arrests, fines, intimidation, and threats have resulted in a decline in resistance. The very threat of being cut off from water completely for refusing to sign onto the system led to many residents signing onto the system begrudgingly. At the launch of our previous research report in 2004, close to five hundred residents came together in the Phiri community hall to discuss how the campaign against prepaid water meters could be built and strengthened. Today, activists bemoan the fact that it is difficult to call a successful mass meeting in Phiri, and it is just a small group of activists (no more than ten) that constitute the PCRf. The reasons for this are a combination of the changing tactics and strategies of Johannesburg Water and the municipality, the inabilities of residents and activists to deal effectively at an individual and collective level with these changes, and the organisational weaknesses of the PCRf, with the additional decline in support from the organisations and movements that helped to form it.

In a focus group discussion, a few residents and members of the PCRf, who had resisted (and continue to resist) the installation of prepaid water meters, offered some possible reasons for this decline in struggle. They spoke of how Johannesburg Water and the municipality have successfully instilled fear in the community through their criminalisation of any struggles against the prepaid meters, and through their threats of arrests and fines for illegal reconnections. In addition, Johannesburg Water and the municipality were said to have 'bought off' certain community members in an overt campaign to sow division and conflict in the PCRf. More importantly, participants highlighted that residents, especially poorer residents, did not have much choice but to sign onto the prepaid water system. Those who resisted were cut off from any water supply, and were eventually given the choice of a standpipe or a prepaid water meter. Many chose the standpipe as they did not have the means to buy water. This, however, meant that they were cutting themselves off from proper sanitation as flush toilets are only possible through the prepaid system. Participants spoke of the awful experiences they

had had of toilets not being flushed, both as a result of standpipes, and as a result of trying to conserve water by restricting the flushing of toilets in households on the prepaid system. They highlighted the serious dangers such unhygienic conditions posed for the health of individuals, households and the community.

When these residents complained to the municipality of their need for proper sanitation, they were told to sign onto the indigent management policy. However, participants pointed out that this policy did not work in the interests of the poorest of the poor as it required the indigent to sign onto prepaid systems of delivery for water and electricity, thus tying the poor to the logic of payment for the basic services required for a decent life. For the poor, then, the indigent management policy worked against their interests – while, in the short-term it would mean the scrapping of their debts, in the long-term it would require that the poor find the money to pay for their basic water and electricity.

Many did, however, find other ways of resisting signing onto the prepaid system. In our focus group, one participant had paid R400 to a Johannesburg Water worker (who had been present at a community meeting) to bypass her prepaid water meter. She currently enjoys free water. Participants claimed that a number of Phiri residents had bypassed their water meters in this way. Some claimed that it had also become a practice for residents to go to the Johannesburg Water office to buy a few water units just to create the impression that they have signed onto the prepaid system when, in fact, they have bypassed their meter. In this way, bypassing the water meter is happening at the level of the individual household, without it having become a generalised strategy of resistance at a community level. In this way, participants acknowledged that it was different from the experience of electricity reconnections, around which an entire movement has been built.

Participants felt that the reasons for this lay with the fact that there was far more fear associated with being caught for bypassing the water meter, and due to the weaknesses of the PCRf and other organisations in Soweto (that

have also been a result of the changing nature of the strategies and tactics employed by the state and Johannesburg Water). While the PCRf was strong in its early days, enjoying support from the SECC, the APF and the Coalition, over time, it has diminished in numbers, strength and support. In particular, participants spoke about conflict between the PCRf and the SECC, and the fact that support from organisations such as the SECC, APF and the Coalition, that had been there in the past, was no longer present. Participants felt that it would be necessary to investigate why this support had waned, and indicated that they were hopeful that this support would be restored with the upcoming court case.

In addition, PCRf activists had become caught up in their individual struggles for basic services, often fighting about the prepaid system within their individual households. As participation in resistance against the prepaid water system became dangerous at the level of the survival of one's individual household and at the level of being punished for participating in acts of protest, the PCRf declined in numbers and effectiveness.

During the visit to the Johannesburg Water office, it also became clear that staff had been warned not to speak to representatives of the APF, and that much time and attention had been spent by Johannesburg Water on trying to undo the work of organisations resisting the prepaid water system. This was evident in the suspicion and fear with which staff members participated in the very short and informal interviews, and in their reluctance to divulge any information to researchers. Interestingly, both staff members, when asked why they would encourage people to sign onto the prepaid water system, could only offer the answer, "in order to have your debts scrapped."

Our findings suggest, then, that the installation of prepaid water meters has had negative effects on both the lives of individual residents as well as on collective struggle and organisations. How we use these results to strengthen and rebuild collective action against the prepaid water meters will be significant as they suggest that we need to be thinking in new ways about the new conditions that the prepaid meters have introduced.

In this regard, it would seem that activists are unclear about what our demands as an alternative to the prepaid water system are or should be. For some participants in the focus group discussion, our demand should be for a return to the flat rate system. For others, the alternative can only lie in the state reassuming its responsibility to deliver free water to the poor. Our findings suggest that we need a much more nuanced approach to the demands that we make. For example, if our demand is to be that of returning to the flat rate of R68, we would be asking residents to start paying more than what they are currently paying under the prepaid system (between R20-R50 per month). At the same time, in a context in which the logic of payment and 'saving' water seems to have been internalised, can we make sense amongst ordinary residents with a demand for free water?

Residents in White City, Jabavu and Dlamini, are, however, currently trying to collectivise strategies of resisting the roll-out of prepaid water meters by making every act of bypassing or reconnection a collective one in which members of the community are brought together to give collective meaning to the physical act of resistance. It would be important for this report to engage with these struggles, both to find ways of building the struggle in Phiri, and to offer lessons for these new struggles as we try to prevent the individualisation of people's relationship to water.

While this report does not give clear answers about how to proceed in our struggle, it throws out realities with which we have to begin engaging as a collective as we shape our demands to meet the changing tactics of the state and Johannesburg Water in its drive to make prepaid water meters non-negotiable in the lives of the poor. What is clear from our findings is that debate and discussion about how we take forward the struggle against prepaid water meters is necessary now more than ever.

3.6 The Installation Of Prepaid Water Meters In Other Communities

Through contact with APF affiliates and a discussion in the final workshop, it was confirmed that prepaid water meters have already been installed in parts of Gauteng other than Soweto. These include Mogale City (Kagiso); Stretford, Extension 4, Orange Farm; parts of Alexandra; all schools in Alexandra; Evaton West; and parts of Soshanguve. In other communities different tactics are being employed to force poor people to sign onto prepaid systems of service delivery e.g. in Alexandra, people are being told that they will only be able to get houses if they agree to prepaid water meters.



4. CONCLUSIONS



Three years since the launch of Operation Gcina 'manzi, and the start of resistance against the installation of prepaid water meters in Phiri, our findings suggest that residents have had no choice but to accept the prepaid system, and have begun internalising the logic of payment for water. For the few who have chosen not to sign onto the prepaid system, life has become more difficult, with access to water made possible only by walking to standpipes outside one's yard, and living without flush toilets. For the majority, life has come to mean finding ways of accessing water through the prepaid system. While the PCRFB argues that a majority of Phiri residents are bypassing their water meters, our findings suggest that residents have begun to speak the language of 'saving water' and 'budgeting efficiently' in order to meet their basic water requirements within the prepaid system. In our survey, 83% of respondents said that they were paying for water every month. Where bypassing is happening, individuals have paid for this reconnection and live with the constant threat of punishment if they are found out by Johannesburg

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Water or council officials and workers. In most cases, where resistance is occurring, it is taking place at a very individualised level, and tactics are emerging on this plane to evade discovery and prosecution. This is significantly different from White City and Dlamini, parts of Soweto in which the prepaid water meters have just begun to be introduced, and where resistance is happening at a collective level. While it would be important for the PCRf to engage with comrades in these areas in order to share experiences, it would also be important for these new struggles to understand the problems that unfolded in Phiri in an attempt to prevent their replication. It would also be important for the Coalition, APF, SECC and PCRf to understand the differences between Phiri and these other areas, and to grapple with the reasons for the different levels and kinds of resistance in these different parts of Soweto. Perhaps this report could be used to facilitate workshops and discussions within Soweto about the different experiences of struggle against the prepaid water meters.

While residents are learning to live with the prepaid system in Phiri, this has resulted in a decline in the quality of their lives. Our findings show clearly how residents are consuming water increasingly just for essential needs and uses, and less and less for recreational and more discretionary tasks, such as small businesses, food gardens, gardening, washing of cars, and so on. At a more basic level, restrictions of water consumption for tasks, such as flushing the toilet, have had negative consequences for the general health of residents, households and the community.

Our findings also suggest that the introduction of prepaid water meters have increased the burden shouldered by women in the household, as the responsibility for buying water units and for controlling the household's consumption of water most often falls on women.

While our findings show how residents are coming to accept the prepaid water meters, they also show that a significant number of residents are dissatisfied with the meters. This provides the space for organisations to revive discussions and debates at a community level about organising again to resist the prepaid system. With the court case currently underway, the PCRf

has a means with which to connect with these dissatisfactions of residents. However, activists within the PCRf and in the rest of Soweto need to come together to reassess their strategies and tactics in this struggle against prepaid water meters in the light of the findings of this research project.

Key to the success of any further struggles in Phiri and Soweto against the installation of prepaid water meters will have to be an acknowledgement that the reality of the majority of residents is that they have accepted the logic of prepayment for water, and that any attempts at collective resistance will have to begin with a challenge of this logic and language of corporate 'saving' and 'waste'. What these findings offer is some proof that the lives of people have become worse under the prepaid regime.

In particular, these findings may be used to:

- Highlight the ways in which individuals have begun to compromise their quality of life through accepting the corporatist logic of 'saving' and 'careful budgeting'.
- Highlight how prepaid water meters have come to serve the function of disciplining individuals through techniques of self-regulation and self-restraint.
- Show the contradictions in state commitments to enhancing the quality of people's lives e.g. while the state encourages people to 'take control of their own lives' by starting food gardens and small businesses, the duty to pay for water restricts the success of such ventures as water is essential for the running of such projects.
- Show how resistance has forced the state and Johannesburg Water to adopt new tactics and strategies in forcing people to sign onto the prepaid water system.
- Show how the prepaid water meter has forced individuals into arrangements of payment for water in spite of collective commitments to resisting the commodification of water.

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- Assist organisations to debate, discuss and clarify viable alternatives to the prepaid water system, that continue to prioritise our demand of 'free basic water'.
- Help with the revival and strengthening of struggles at a local level against the further installation of prepaid water meters.

What remains is for this report to be debated and used to facilitate further discussion and debate about how to shape campaigns against the installation of prepaid water meters at community level that speak to the immediate fears, needs and interests of residents. These are residents who see themselves as having no choice but to accept the prepaid system as the only means to a decent quality of life. For the poorest of the poor, who have no option but to choose a standpipe as they know that they will not be able to afford to buy water, and for whom, ironically, even indigency is not an option as it requires signing onto prepaid systems of delivery for basic services, our campaigns need to be redefined to imagine and strive for more than the less than basic levels of services currently offered as 'rewards' for resistance or refusal of the prepaid system. Most importantly, our campaigns need to disrupt the process by which the logic of prepayment is being naturalised. In looking towards the strengthening of collective struggles against the prepaid water meters in greater Soweto, we need to learn from the lessons of Phiri where even resistance has become an individual, lonely, and fearful activity.

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