WATER PRIVATIZATION IN METROPOLITAN MANILA: 
ASSESSING THE STATE OF EQUITABLE ACCESS TO WATER SERVICES

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This research will study the privatization of the Metropolitan Waterworks & Sewerage System [MWSS], the agency tasked to provide water and sewerage services for 16 million Metro Manila residents. Hailed as the largest privatization program in the world for a water utility, this program has had two private firms providing water services since 1997.

Even as the Metro Manila water privatization and other similar programs have been acknowledged as successful endeavors in certain respects, there is still continuing debate on whether or not water privatization benefits the poor. Some literature suggests that they do derive benefits, citing increased access to safe and higher quality water. Others maintain that privatization programs are not pro-poor as marginalized consumers are usually the last to get connected to the system or even unable to get water connections at all.

In debates concerning the supply of water to the poor, it is increasingly argued that institutional and governance issues should take precedence over the relative merits of public or private provision of water service. Thus, water governance is a key issue, with focus on equitable access to water, better provision for the needs of people and ecosystems, increased water use efficiency, and involvement of concerned parties in decision making.

My research will assess the state of equitable access in a privatized urban water system. Specifically, I ask the following questions:
1) To what extent do different communities and areas in Metro Manila have the same opportunity in gaining access to potable water from the system?
2) With regard to water pressure, availability, quality, and affordability, what are the lived experiences of the different communities within the service area?

In answering these questions, I will use indicators to investigate general patterns that prevail across the different socio-economic classes. Such indicators include service coverage, water pressure, water quality, water supply availability, and willingness and ability to pay. Specifically, I will employ a coupled social-hydrological approach to establish and analyze these trends. The hydrological component will consist of actual field measurements and concessionaire data from existing regulatory and accomplishment reports. The social component will comprise of primary data from extensive consumer surveys conducted by MWSS.

General patterns established from both social and hydrological components will be compared to assess the conditions of water access across all consumers, with particular focus on poor households. By relying on empirically grounded facts and realities, this holistic approach fills in gaps that existing literature are not able to address with respect to the assessment of programs that engage the private sector in the provision of basic services like water.

To include dimensions of the lived experiences with regard to the Metro Manila water privatization, I will conduct interviews with officials and representatives of MWSS, private
concessionaires, NGOs, local governments, consumer organizations, and urban poor groups. These interviews will offer better appreciation of the major stakeholders’ viewpoints and assessments of this privatization program.

I will review and learn from existing literature on water privatization, water governance, human rights to water, Neoliberalism, benchmarking, and water privatization experiences to contextualize the results of my study. The broader context of results will include assessments of tariff structures, ability to access water, and changing quality of water for different communities.

**Keywords**: water privatization, water governance, equity, water poverty, Metro-Manila, Social Hydrological Systems, performance assessment, indicators, infrastructure development