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Drawers of water. Domestic water use in East Africa.

Author(s) : [WHITE, G. F.](#) ; [BRADLEY, D. J.](#) ; [WHITE, A. U.](#)

Book : [Drawers of water. Domestic water use in East Africa.](#) 1972 pp.xii+306 pp.

Abstract : Someone once said that the two most highly prized benefits which have been bestowed on mankind are the match and the water tap. Most of mankind has a match but it would seem that two-thirds of the human race still have no tap at home, and in East Africa, we are told (and this probably applies to most of the world) that 9 out of 10 households have no domestic water. This in spite of the fact that the textbook of public health for the last hundred years or more, ever since Buchan has drummed in the lesson that pure water is the *sine qua non* of public health.

right? And, if so, how is it that the lesson cannot be universally applied? Not failing to catch up with the problem but, it would appear, we are actually slipping the rate of population increase outstrips, in many parts of the world, the availability of proper water supplies. This book is a timely reminder of the importance of this problem. It is not written from a medical point of view-there are more than enough books on that aspect. Nor is it written from an engineering point of view-abundant technical information is available for would-be water providers. It is written from an anthropologist's point of view and from an economist's point of view. In other words, what does lack of water actually mean to those masses of society who are not only the "drawers of water" but are also, socially speaking, the "hewers of wood?" And a very sorry story it tells of children having to scoop water from shallow holes in a dry river bed with families living around, or the pathetic attempts to protect wells or springs damaged or broken by ignorant-and no doubt very thirsty-users, and the rapidly expanding shantytowns where water has to be purchased from itinerant vendors.

The survey starts off with a detailed examination of the various types of water supply actually used in various parts of East Africa, both in the towns and in rural areas. The authors discuss the "cost" in terms of energy and time as well as the actual cost to the individual user and the capital outlay, and the wide variation in volume of water depending on many factors, social, climatic and economic. The authors go on to discuss the relationship between water supplies on the one hand and health and productivity on the other-a difficult exercise in the absence of basic data other than those very meagrely collected themselves, but sufficiently conclusive to demonstrate that proper water supplies would pay huge dividends on both counts. But the answers are not always what one might expect. For example, the reasons for the "choice" of water supply are often several different sources are available including pure bore-hole water, are often not as predictable. It would seem that human beings can react, in this respect, rather than the proverbial horse. The authors also demolish the myth that women actually go on an evening stroll to the well. Quarrels over water usage, especially when it is scarce, are in fact a frequent cause of social disturbance.

The book is not just a philosophical study however. Some very practical observations have been made- for example a type of valve which will allow a pre-set volume of water to be dispensed when the tap is turned. And the detailed cost-benefit analysis presented here will be of interest to planners, politicians and of course to those of us who are trying to press for more attention to this way of helping to raise the level of living and happiness in these countries. *W. Norman-Taylor.*

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