

Greetings from Ghana #12

Public Services

The utilities here operate kind of. Some of them are fairly understandable in how they work. Others seem to defy logic. And others – well, all you can do is shake your head and realize that it is what it is.

Take water, for example. Here, if a house has water it means that there is at least one poly tank that is hooked up to the house. In simpler homes the tank is outside and elevated above the roofline and that is how you have water pressure – by gravity. In better homes there is a pump hooked to the tank and whenever the water pressure in the supplyline to the house drops it kicks in. There are no pressure tanks. When the electricity shuts off, so does the water. . . except for the meager amount provided by gravity.

The water tanks are hooked to a metered supply line if the house has hooked up to the public utility. The trick is that the utility only turns on certain sections of the community at once. There is no rhyme or reason to it. Sometimes the water will flow at ten p.m. on a Friday night and another week on a Tuesday afternoon and another week (or more) not at all.

Some of the homes have polytanks with bad float valves, like our neighbors. We know when the water is running because their tank just keeps on gushing water and you can hear it splashing on the concrete. The way to fix the tank? You wait until it is bone dry and call a plumber and you end up being out of water for a day or so.

You do not have to be hooked up to the utility to get water for your polytank. And for a variety of reasons some buildings are not. In those situations – or in the case of your tank running dry because the utility has not come on for weeks – you call for a water truck to come and fill your tank at double to triple the cost of the utility.

The water trucks are flat bed vehicles with a pump and two or three poly tanks on it. They fill up at water farms, large plots of walled property filled with tanks. The farms fill with water from boreholes and also from the local utility. Some are owned by the water utility employees. So when the utility decides not to turn on the flow. . . well, let's just say there is little sense of urgency in the home office.

As bad as you may think that is, the water company is just part of the pack. The garbage collection service will from time to time just stop. Sometimes they run out of space at the landfill. Sometimes they just do not show up. If you want garbage collection you have to go to the office and pay a fee for the form to fill out. Then you must buy your collection bin and transport it home. Your collection day of the week is not set. As soon as you think it is on Tuesday they will show up on a Thursday. But be back to Monday the following week and maybe Thursday the week after. In February they did not show up for three weeks. When they

did they were handing out bills where the rate had doubled, from 54 cedis a month to 108. The following week they did not show. We put out the garbage every Tuesday and then hope.

The electrical utility here feeds the grid for Togo. Pity Togo. Here, your electricity meter is prepaid. You enter a code and the meter turns on. If they change the rate at what they are charging per kilowatt the meter will know the increased rate even if you do not and deplete your account accordingly. So when the power goes out, the first thing you do is look at the meter. If the little indicator lights are on, you know you are out of money and need to get more credits. You could go online to refill except that the modem is down. But you can access it through a phone app or go to a local office to buy more. If you buy electricity and there is a glitch then you have to go to the utility office itself and get it corrected. That means you buy more electricity while they figure out what happened to your payment that did not register.

Sitting in the dark? It could be that the power company has decided to shut off your area for whatever reason. If you look and the meter is dark then there is no power in the lines. Generator sales are quite brisk here at times. Without a generator your power could be off for an hour (unlikely), for the majority of the sunlit day (probable), or the whole day and part of the next (also probable). There is no reason to feel imposed on or to get upset. You are not the only one. In fact, British Airways had to return a flight to London about a week ago because on their way they found out they could not land at the Accra Airport. The airport had no power.

Side note: They put their passengers up when they got back to Heathrow and flew in the next day.

When it comes to roads and the lack of continuous pavement or even of pavement there are multiple parties in play. In the U.S., in places like Port Angeles, when the local government cannot afford to put a road in for a new development, the contractor gets to do it. Over here, for a walled subdivision with its own security, etc., sure. For an area where people decide to build houses, nope. So there are areas where the dirt with houses on each side could be considered a road but only in the loosest of terms. I have seen "roads" that Uber drivers refuse to enter.

The roads are typically taken care of by the local assembly. The assembly has a limited budget and they do not want to spend money that might be covered by a larger government project in the future. So they do not spend the money. The politicians call for road improvements just before re-election. Once they are in power the promises go on the back burner. So the locals are waiting for the government and the government is not doing anything unless greatly motivated.

Bring the permit officer in to the mix.

A few years ago when I was having the roof on the garage replaced I got a phone call from the city building inspector, Jim. "Hey Doc," the friendly voice asked, "You still living where you used to?" I said I was. He continued, "Drove by the other day. Looks like you are doing a

garage roof.” I said I was doing just that. “Gotta permit?” I was quick to respond affirmatively. “Good man. Thanks.” And he rang off.

Things are a bit different here. The building inspectors here go by a property and find that someone is building (with concrete). The inspector will take a can of red spray paint and leave a message. You can drive around almost any neighborhood and see messages from years ago to recent: “Produce Permit.” “Stop work.” “Remove by xx/xx/xxxx!” And it is also not uncommon to see the work continuing. One group even replied with their own terse message in red that suggested the inspector accomplish an act most would find physically impossible.

On occasion the inspector will return and if they do not collect their “fee” they will seize equipment. Many of the shops here are half-size shipping containers and I have seen inspectors who came in with an excavator and tipped the unit on its doors.

Many people here have no regard for permits or boundaries and will build on other people’s land. Quite often the land is a road shoulder. One of the things I liked about this house was that on the main road about a block away was a lot of little Mom & Pop shops where you could get vegetables, beverages and incidental groceries. The road is in bad repair and drivers cross lanes to avoid some of the potholes. But for walking it was okay for the most part.

About two weeks ago an inspector came through and marked up properties, “Remove by 4/4/2022!” People, of course, paid little attention. Had they noticed the surveyors on site earlier or paid attention to the government official bragging about the new soccer facility going in about 2 km from here things might have been different. On the 4th of April large dump trucks came in behind excavators and hauled off the building rubble from structures so marked.

First the buildings were removed. Now they are wiping out trees that have stood for hundreds of years. Next will come a brand new, widened road in time for the international visitors arriving for the soccer tournament. As far as the shops. . . some were moved to a nearby field until they can be relocated. Others are gone for good. Watching it was almost like the final scene from Fiddler on the Roof as the village evacuates ahead of the Cossacks.

There is so little that is done on a regular basis that people forget when government does act it can move quickly. And when it does it always seems to catch people by surprise.

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I was going to send this out last night but couldn’t. They cut the power.