

CHANGING THE FLOW

Water Movements in Latin America



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Published March 2009

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FOOD & WATER WATCH is a non-profit consumer organisation that works to ensure clean water and safe food. We challenge the corporate control and abuse of our food and water resources by empowering people to take action and by transforming the public consciousness about what we eat and drink. Working with grassroots organisations around the world, we advocate policies that guarantee safe, wholesome food produced in a humane and sustainable manner and public, rather than private control of water resources including oceans, rivers, and groundwater.



OTHER WORLDS is a multi-national, multi-media education and organising collaborative to inspire hope and knowledge that another world is possible, and to help build it. It compiles and brings to light political, economic, and social alternatives that are flourishing throughout the world, and inspires and helps the public throughout the Americas open up new pathways to adapt and replicate them.



The Red VIDA (Inter-American Vigilance for the Defense and Right to Water) Network was formed in August 2003 by 54 organisations from 16 countries that came together in San Salvador to launch a platform of struggle to defend water as a common good and a fundamental human right. The network is composed of human rights organisations, religious groups, trade unions, indigenous communities, environmentalists, public and community-based service providers, consumer organisations, and other groups from across the Americas.

Reclaiming Public Water

The RPW Network started with the publication in 2005 of “Reclaiming Public Water: Achievements, struggles and visions from around the world.” The open and horizontal network brings together civil society campaigners, trade unionists, academics and progressive public water managers from more than 35 countries.



TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE (TNI), founded in 1974, is an international network of activist-scholars committed to critical analyses of the global problems of today and tomorrow. It aims to provide intellectual support to those movements concerned to steer the world in a democratic, equitable and environmentally sustainable direction.

ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

This booklet grew out of a meeting organized by the Red VIDA in Cochabamba, Bolivia in August, 2008. The meeting, which is described in the second part of the booklet, focused largely on the just, equitable, and ecological provision of drinking water and sanitation services. We recognize that while this is a crucial focus, it is but one the many areas through which water flows. Throughout the Americas and the world, movements are afoot to address many other issues related to water, such as agriculture, large dams, extractive industries, energy, climate change, resource rights, and indigenous sovereignty. While the interviews included here focus largely on the question of drinking water and sanitation, we hope to open windows onto the many other struggles around water, and the many ways in which water is a central element in the development of just, equitable, and sustainable societies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The creators of this booklet would like to acknowledge the generous commitment of time and knowledge by all of the water warriors whose words appear herein, and all of the organisers and participants of the gathering in Cochabamba, Bolivia.

We would also like to thank the following individuals for volunteering their time and translation skills, without whom this booklet would not have been possible: Ocetelo Baena, Kristin Bard, Kate Barton, Simon Claessens, Sam Cogdell, Claudia López, Lili Man, Lucy Moffatt, Dale Newton, Nicola Runci-man, Kyle Wark, Kelly Wester, Lily Whitesell, and Dylan Wooters.

This booklet was made possible through the generous financial support of the Lawson Valentine Foundation, Food and Water Watch, and the Transnational Institute.

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INTRODUCTION: THE RISE OF WATER ON THE GLOBAL AGENDA

In case after case around the world, water has been turned into a profit-making commodity – preventing access to the most essential element on Earth. Pollution, corporate takeover, and the mismanagement of water ecosystems have resulted in dire water poverty and scarcity in many parts of the world. Private ownership of water and water-delivery systems does not resolve, but rather, compounds the longstanding and deep-seated abuse, neglect, mismanagement, and exploitation of water.

Mark Twain said, “Whiskey’s for drinking, water’s for fighting over.” As you read this, corporations and governments the world over – backed by their allies in the World Bank, IMF, and World Trade Organisation – are putting ‘for sale’ signs on urban and rural water systems. In 90 percent of the world, the state still controls water, and even where it is partnered with a community, it often fails egregiously to protect earth rights and human rights. (We can see this in the deaths of 4000 to 5000 children each day as a result of lack of access to safe water.)

Despite this bleak reality, citizens are both effectively resisting threats and creating alternatives. They are bringing fresh perspectives, building the power and the rights of the citizen and the worker, and creating innovations in public and community water systems.

A global uprising is underway to ensure water as a protected part of the global commons. Popular pressure is winning victories, setting precedents and winning inventive guarantees to free or low-cost, accessible, safe water. In one of many examples, in April, 2008, after a many-year fight involving political and legal pressure, the grassroots Coalition Against Water Privatisation won a lawsuit granting the township of Soweto, South Africa, the legal right to tap water for all, no matter how poor. Communities across the U.S. and Canada have risen up and demanded that their representatives rescind sweetheart deals that allow Nestlé and other corporations to pump water from rivers, lakes, and aquifers and then sell it as bottled water for up to 1000 times the cost of tap water. Sustained mobilisation has kept corporations from purchasing municipal water systems in many parts of the worlds. The Council of Popular and Indigenous Organisations in Honduras used courts and direct action to stop corporations from building hydroelectric plants on their rivers. The list goes on.

Popular pressure is forcing some governments to step up, too. In November, 2008, eight South Asian states (India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) issued a joint declaration recognising that access to sanitation and safe drinking water is a basic right, and making sanitation a national priority. National constitutions in Uruguay, Ecuador, and Bolivia now enshrine water as a human right and bar it from being sold into private hands. As of this writing, water rights activists in Colombia have finished collecting the requisite number of signatures to amend the national constitution, and are lobbying the Parliament for a referendum; Costa Rica has a draft bill pending votes. Mexico and El Salvador have started campaigns to lobby their governments to deem water a human right in their constitutions. In 2005, after years of protest by residents and international allies against a Coca-Cola plant for extracting so much groundwater that it dried up many wells and polluted the groundwater in the village of Plachimada in Kerala, India, local government decreed that residents’ access to water trumped corporate power, and ordered the operation shut down.



Residents of Cochabamba, Bolivia, celebrate after the Bechtel Corporation ceded ownership of municipal waters.
Photo: Tom Kruse

Elsewhere around the world, people and governments are fighting dams, water pollution, and other destructive development. Rather than allowing this development path to continue, they are protecting this precious ecological resource through alternative water management practices such as water conservation, ecological sanitation, reforestation, rainwater harvesting, water catchments and retention structures, and watershed protection.

In cases where water has been barred – or wrested back – from corporate ownership, various management models are in use. Though the challenges are immense, villages and cities are meeting various needs and contexts through public management, cooperatives, public-community partnerships, and community management. In addition, public-public partnerships are being developed to diffuse good practice and learning. These systems of water service delivery stand out as the only viable and just solutions for the dire challenges in water and sanitation. They are the only vehicles through which those citizens and those workers can take part in controlling and managing their own water. They require government transparency and the willingness to ensure both participation by the citizenry and democracy in the workplace (thus allowing workers and trade unions to actively participate and co-manage water systems). These are the ingredients that will make it possible – and in some cases, are making it possible – to ensure the right to water for all, especially for the poorest and most vulnerable.

Integral to the fight for water is another fight, equally fundamental, for a new model of citizen power and a new accountability from the state. Oscar Olivera, a spokesperson for the popular movements that ejected the Bechtel Corporation from Bolivia in 2000, is fond of saying that, “Behind the fight for water is the struggle for democracy.” But democracy, in this sense, is not limited to the election of

officials to national office in hopes that they will represent the will of the people. For the water movements, true democracy demands a redefinition of politics and of the nation itself as a political structure. Saúl Atanacio Roqué Morales, an elder statesman for control of indigenous water from Mexico, reminds us that, “The nation is us, the people.”

The movement is discovering, too, a new definition of citizenry that goes beyond national boundaries. Throughout our regions in the Americas, we are making important steps toward building alliances that, at the same time, respect the differences and diversity of experiences. We are using globalisation to our favour, to bring us in close contact and solidarity with each other. As Salvadoran water warrior Ana Ella Gomez says, “We are many voices, one echo.”

In a world where wealth, resources, and political power are usually concentrated in a small group, the wave of victories in water battles shows what highly informed and organised popular movements can do. The war is far from won; in most parts of the world, water privatisation is still the dominant trend. And where water remains public, it is often in the hands of corrupt or incapable public authorities that refuse to be transparent or to allow participation. But we are seeing that the fight for access to clean, affordable water can be won. To quote Ana Ella again: “We are constructing a new definition of hope.”

In this booklet you will hear from some of the most visionary water warriors in Latin America. We hope you will be inspired by the visions, experiences, and lessons they have to share. We also hope that if you are not already, you too will become a water warrior to guarantee that water be protected as the fundament of life itself, for human beings and the whole planet.

PART ONE: INDIVIDUAL VOICES

If you want to make waves, as we say, if you want to combat the avarice and indiscriminate greed of the multinationals, of capital, government is not enough. The only ones who can combat that are the people – regular, everyday people.

— Carmen Sosa, Uruguay

THE PLANETARY VISION

Adriana Marquisio, Uruguay

“It’s a struggle that we will all come out of together, or none of us will.”

Like all countries in the 90s after the harsh dictatorships went out in ‘85, we had four neoliberal governments that promoted deregulation and the easing of standards that had protected public drinking water services. That led to the privatisation of the water service in Uruguay’s wealthiest department, the Maldonado Department. As workers for the state-owned enterprise, we put up a big fight against privatisation in that department. It was hard; we struggled against privatisation for five years. But Dr. Jorge Batlle’s government turned over control to Aguas de Bilbao in Barcelona.

We started to analyse how we could put a stop to the process that had taken place in Maldonado. As workers we started trying to figure out how we could, but we didn’t understand well enough what privatisation was: whether it was a new assault from the neoliberal model that was sweeping through basic services – through health, education, water, the basic needs of the population. We created a coalition in which everyone participated equally – workers, housewives, families, environmentalists, scientists, academics, and professionals in the region.

In 1992, the Uruguayan labour movement launched the first referendum in defence of Uruguayan state-owned enterprises, where it won with 80 percent of the population. Uruguayans officially declared themselves against privatisation. All of us are owners of our state-owned enterprises, and that’s what we pay for. That couldn’t be transferred into the hands of privatisation. As Uruguayans, we were clear about that. We are clear that the state is the people, and the people must have ownership of public services. There is a strong culture that the state is not something way out there, far away. The state is good, right? And it can be managed in a way that serves the people and has the people at heart.

We have also succeeded in reforming Uruguay's constitution. When we started our campaign, people said, "How can simple workers, simple people, dare to reform Uruguay's constitution?" Because the constitution had been written by great intellectual academics, top notch. But we showed that the people can write, edit, make a proposal, and that there is no reason for any state, law, or constitution to exist, if its goal is not the happiness of the people living in that state.

As workers we understand that our job is linked to defending water as a scarce, finite resource. We bring water to the people, and to do so we have to be conscious of the fact that water comes from a watershed and that we have to take care of this watershed to maintain it for future generations. So, we put these fundamental sentences into the constitution: Water is essential for life. Water is a fundamental human right. Only legal state personnel should carry out water management exclusively and directly, with society's participation in its planning, management, and control.

This is a very small battle in a hard fight that is taking place. But somehow it has strengthened us, it has opened our eyes, it has united us, it has allowed us the possibility to share. We have learned a lot from other cultures.

That's where we are. This is not a solution that we want only for Uruguay. We want it for Latin America. We want it for the world.

Water has to do with life. Water has to do with keeping the family clean and nourished. It has to do with the survival of the species. If we think of it from the point of view of instinct, it's unthinkable that a woman wouldn't link herself to the defence of life. Women are going to defend life beyond where they are, beyond what is required of them. We know the reality of many women who have to walk kilometres to go looking for water for their families ... in Africa, in many places.



Adriana Marquisio is at center. Photo: Eduardo Sousa

In Latin America, women are capable of giving everything to guarantee the health of their family, of their children. That's a theme that is connected to life, and water is part of it. Our logo for the defence of water is a womb with a child inside it. A droplet of water symbolises the womb and the child inside. Women will try to unite people, men, nations. They will defend life beyond their culture, beyond ideologies, beyond religion, beyond their borders.

I have found working women; peasant women; native women; intellectual, academic, political women ... and when we talk about this, we have the same way of thinking. All of us want the same thing, regardless of what we do or where we are. All of us want to preserve life. And for me that is women's great mission right now and in the creation of this new era, of this new way of relating to each other.

Rivers, the waterways that should unite us, have separated us and have started conflicts between people who have to have a vision of how to better share our common property, our resources. We are convinced that it is possible for everyone to cooperate, exchange, find solutions to our needs because there is no problem of wealth; there is no problem of lack of resources. We have shared with many friends and colleagues how we have each been able to solve problems: with little money but lots of imagination, lots of creativity, and lots of participation.

So the call is to invite others to join the cause, right? To share, to look for a horizon, a new way to build relationships between people and nature. Everything that happens locally is connected with this international force, with this planetary vision, with this deep dimension that we must share with our brothers. It's a struggle that we will all come out of together, or none of us will.

This is my vision. This is what I want for my children. This is what I want for all the good human beings of this world.

Adriana Marquisio has worked for 24 years in water and sanitation in Uruguay. She is president of the Union of Sanitation Workers and a member of the Uruguayan Federation of Sanitation Project Workers.

PROTECTING TERRITORY, PROTECTING CULTURE

Danilo Urrea, Colombia

“The fight for water, and the fight for life, has to go beyond country, flag, colour, politics, and language.”

I think that Latin America today is marked by two fundamental components. One is policy demands from international financial institutions, which are beginning to be realised through transnational corporations and their subsidiaries in our countries. Nevertheless, though privatisation has developed significantly due to the imposition of these policies, an imposition in which many of our governments are complicit, we can also see the other side of the coin – a well-organised resistance, at least ten or fifteen years old, from the social movements. There are many aspects we could point to, of how social movements organise themselves to defend water and confront the neoliberal policies of the World Bank, but I would refer specifically to how the indigenous movement in Ecuador, the indigenous peasant movement in Bolivia, movements and social organisations in Colombia, social organisations in Paraguay, and the trade unions in countries like Argentina, have been trying to reverse those policies through constitutional changes and changes in domestic laws.

But these struggles do not only take place in the arena of laws and constitutions. There are also ways in which communities in all of these countries re-appropriate their water sources, but beyond just their water source – and this is very important – their territories. I always like to talk about the notion of territory because we’ve been offered a skewed vision of what territory is. We are told that ‘territory’ means the land, but really territory means the construction of a life profoundly rooted in our natural heritage. The river, the watershed, the mountain, all of this forms part of what we mean by territory, and all of it is profoundly linked to culture. So for the communities, organisations, and movements in Latin America, the defence of territory is fundamental; protecting territory is protecting culture, and water runs through both. The issue of water is in every one of the elements I’ve mentioned, and this allows us to build popular power by way of environmental education.

Until we in Latin America understand that we are the owners of our lives, the owners of our past and our future, and until we learn to recognise, to create, to write our own histories, we are going to carry an enemy inside of us: the colonisation of our minds. Once we understand this, we can organise through our cultural strategies and traditional practices to confront the international financial institutions and their transnational corporations.

Once we have liberated territories and water sources, once the water sources belong to the communities, once they are common property not private property, then we can begin to think about management. Our experiences have shown us that many communities have good management, transparent

management, self-management, that does not depend on resources delivered by the state, or on cooperative agreements with private companies. In Latin America this is possible, but we are still in a nascent stage. We are at the moment of birth and, in some cases, the consolidation of public models, models of community water management. But this demands the support of a state — one that is transformed, that is transparent. It requires governments that legislate for the people and not for the interests of profit.

The resistance in Latin America has gone through a change. From a moment of resistance where we said “no”, rejecting what we were faced with, we’ve passed to a positive resistance, one that offers proposals, and this is the true resistance. Stopping the processes of privatisation is of no use to us if we don’t have clear models for managing what we don’t want others to manage. Partnerships between public companies and community systems in Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, and Uruguay have shown us that success via these paths is possible. They are pilot programs – test programs that are developing nicely – and surely we can take elements from them and adapt them to use in other places.

We can’t just wait and hold out hope; we have to construct our possible futures by joining our different struggles with the idea that we can have control over our lives, that we can re-create our own histories. Hope is interesting if we can use it to strengthen ourselves, if we can transform it into empowerment, the ability to manage our own lives.

Danilo Urrea works with the Living Water project of the environmental organisation CENSAT in Colombia, which is affiliated with Friends of the Earth. He is a researcher of privatisation and commodification of water in Latin America.

WE CONTINUE TO HOLD THE ANCESTRAL VALUES

Saúl Atanasio Roqué Morales, Mexico

“We are not only working to defend the physical environment, but also to defend the meaning of life and the relationship that we should have with nature.”

I am from the indigenous community of Xoxocotla in the state of Morelos, Mexico. I am with an organisation from our community called the System for Potable Water Xoxocotla that is reclaiming community-based forms of organisation in our community's drinking water system.

Within our community we continue to hold the ancestral values we inherited. Why do we continue to follow the cultural values that were left to us? Because in daily life we are always in contact with nature, with our lands, with our water, and with our air. We live in harmony with nature because we don't like the way that modernity is advancing, destroying our territory and our environment. We don't want the damage and the destruction to continue. We want our children to continue living, respecting and enjoying nature because we have seen how in the cities, the children lose contact with nature. We still watch our children chase the butterflies and the birds. We see the harmony between the crops and the land, and above all, we respect our water and we continue to perform ceremonies that give thanks for the water, which is something traditional for our community.

There is a ceremony we do together with a group of neighbouring peoples at a sacred place in the community. In this ceremony, we predict what the coming season will be like so we can predict the harvest, to know if it will be good or bad. After conducting the ceremony, the participants return to the community and share what they observed with the rest of the population, joyfully dancing with music, to let them know about the weather predictions and what the water will be like. We continue with this tradition. It never crosses our mind to leave it behind. On the contrary, we believe that we should keep instilling these values in our children.

There is a legend here in our community that previously there was suffering because of lack of water. The story goes that a family was given the responsibility to go to Mount Popocatepetl to bring water for the community in a *guaje* or *bule*, which is a bowl or jug that we use to collect water. While returning with the water the jug broke, and so the community was left without water. The family that went to bring the water didn't want to return to the village because they had failed, because they tripped and the jug that carried the water was broken.



Saúl Atanasio Roque Morales is second from left. Photo: Fernanda Robinson

It was told that in order to break the curse, so the community could count on having water again, an indigenous person from another place had to appear. This person was General Lázaro Cárdenas from Michoacán, whose origin is Purépecha. When he passed through the community on a tour as presidential candidate, he promised a water works project. And so we have potable water for consumption that comes from a spring 12 kilometres away. During the time of the government of Lázaro Cárdenas the community participated, with pick and shovel, in a 12-kilometre excavation to bring water to the community. The water is very good and very clean. Through this legend, the people gained more knowledge about what water represents. This legend encourages the continued defence of water.

In more recent times, like in the 80s, the state of Morelos wanted to privatise water. They wanted to change the laws and they considered privatisation. We were not in agreement with this. Our community began to circulate a lot of information about what it means to bring in a private company to control water administration. Together with other communities in our state, we organised and went before the lower house of our state congress in order to protest these laws. We had to take control of the state's congress where the congressmen were. The buildings were occupied, and the politicians agreed to change the law. In the new law they included our demand that “organised indigenous peoples can control and administer their water.”

Since that time, we have been the ones that administer and control our water system without having to be responsible to government authorities. We saw that the government authorities didn't have the community's best interests in mind. They took advantage of their positions, reporting inaccurate numbers, saying that they were out of funds, and we didn't receive any benefits. From the moment we began to administer the system, there was a complete change. Those who are now in charge of the potable water

“This land belongs to us. It’s the great heritage of our people and we will uphold the law.”

system are members of a local committee that is elected by a community assembly.

In the current structure of the potable water system the highest authority is the assembly, which elects the committee. The committee consists of consumers who are members of the association. The committee members must have the support of grassroots representatives, consumers from every block. The committee members don’t receive any salary; it’s volunteer work. The only ones who receive salaries are the workers or the operators: those who install new water connections, those who do repairs.

The assembly members also choose a block leader, who will represent them to the committee. The block leaders are also those who bring the consumers together for whatever work might be needed by the community, such as opening up a road or digging a ditch. The block leaders don’t get salary either.

We see that new housing settlements have water 24 hours per day, while the indigenous people don’t. This is what we protest. Why don’t they respect what is established in the constitution? The constitution says that all natural resources belong to the nation, and the nation consists of our people, the indigenous people. All of the territory where we live belongs to us.

We’re not against people from the outside coming to live with us, but we don’t want them to destroy our ecological surroundings. There are areas where it’s alright to build, but the area where our springs are replenished should be respected, so that we can continue conserving our life source. The government doesn’t accept this; they neither respect our environment nor our ecology. On the contrary, they are facilitating their destruction, and this is greatly affecting our communities.

For this reason, we organised thirteen of our communities to manage our water in a formal, peaceful, and legal way. We don’t get much attention, even though it’s now been more than three years since we began the movement. The movement is to defend our springs from the construction of housing settlements and a golf course. Three years ago we started to speak out against the government’s actions, and they didn’t pay attention. A year ago, in June, we blockaded the roads, but the government didn’t respect the agreements that resulted from those blockades. The thirteen communities directly affected by the water problems will decide whether we’ll do further blockades to protest the lack of government compliance this past year.

As human beings and indigenous people, the land belongs to us, but the authorities don’t understand or accept this. The authorities will continue protecting the companies and we don’t know what will happen. In the negotiations that have been held, we warned the government that if they rule on the side of the companies, we will continue to fight. This land belongs to us. It’s the great heritage of our people, and we will uphold the law.

As long as there is no justice, we will continue fighting. The authorities have criminalised our actions; they say we are led by guerrillas. We respond by saying, “Well, you refuse to see what is going on. We are the first ones to be affected by not having water. Water is essential for life. The reason we

demonstrate is because of your inability to solve the problem, which is your responsibility. It is not our fault; it's yours."

Fortunately, we know that our movement has the support of other people because they have joined us. We've received positive support and acknowledgement from society and the media about what our movement is doing to defend our natural resources and the environment. We say, "The fight is not only for us. It's for all of humanity because we all need nature, and yet we have lost the respect we had for nature."

It's not only necessary to recover our land and environment, but also our way of thinking. We must give more value to natural things. We are not only working to defend the physical environment, but also to defend the meaning of life and the relationship that we should have with nature.

Something that must take root is respect for indigenous culture and values. In our communities, this respect hasn't been lost in the same way as it has been lost in cities. Our people believe in nature. We know that in order to live we must protect it, not only in our community, but for all communities. We also know that by organising our people, we can present a united front in the struggle to defend and retain what belongs to us. We won't allow the government, our authorities or foreign companies to own or take advantage of our resources. We won't allow it.

Saúl Atanasio Roqué Morales is from the indigenous community of Xoxocotla in the state of Morelos, México. He belongs to the organisation Drinking Water Systems of Xoxocotla.

A NEW DEFINITION OF HOPE

Ana Ella Gómez, El Salvador

“In defending water rights, there are no rivers that divide us.”

The Centre for the Defence of the Consumer, where I work, is part of a citizen campaign called Blue Democracy that aims to reclaim the human right to water in El Salvador. We are strengthening a multi-sector alliance in which the common point of departure is the defence of water. I believe that it is very important. It means that trade union rights are being viewed from the perspective of the right to water, the rights of the women are being viewed from the perspective of the right to the water – environmentalists, consumers, the church – all sectors really. Before, we never thought that trade unionists, environmentalists and women could find a single platform of struggle. I think this is an example that we should share, an invitation to all the people of the world.

We are now working on a campaign to reform the country's constitution and get water recognised as a human right. We are about to organise, in January 2009, an unofficial grassroots referendum. My country doesn't recognise the referendum process, but we see this as a way to win an important battle in which citizens have a chance to vote for water, have a chance to say yes, yes for water. To promote that campaign, we're doing water theatre, water music, travelling festivals that we call 'pouring' the right to water. The pitcher from which you pour is a symbol in our country of how we have been denied our right to the water.

We are also working on a proposed water policy that deals with three main types of services: state, municipal, and communal. In the case of El Salvador, we're convinced that we have to claim the public water supply by strengthening the public company that already exists. We want an efficient public company, but we also want a public company with public participation. We also want to strengthen the municipalities that provide good local development with participation by the people. And we want to strengthen community systems that fulfil a role of collective benefit for the community.

One of Latin America's victories has been the belief that water must be in public hands, must be held by the community. That the people have the power to make their own decisions and that, whether a company is public or is communally owned, it is essential that the citizens, the men and women, participate in strategic decision-making. We can't have third parties deciding the future of the population; it has to be the people themselves.

We have a very clear vision of the path we're going to follow and the demands we're going to make. The demands go beyond a change in who controls government; they go way beyond political parties. They have to do with the history and the rights of the people. It's a new definition of hope, one that says that it's possible to follow a different path, and that that path follows what the people demand, need, want.

In the end, what do we want? We want people to be able to not just share their opinions, but also to make their own decisions. Each model must be based on the reality of each community and each community needs to define what type of public or community set-up meets its population's needs. We want a commitment to protect our water, a commitment made by everyone, a shared responsibility. We want a system in which service providers are also responsible for protecting and taking care of the water. It's a horizontal relationship between those who have the responsibility to manage the companies or the systems, and those who are receiving the benefits.

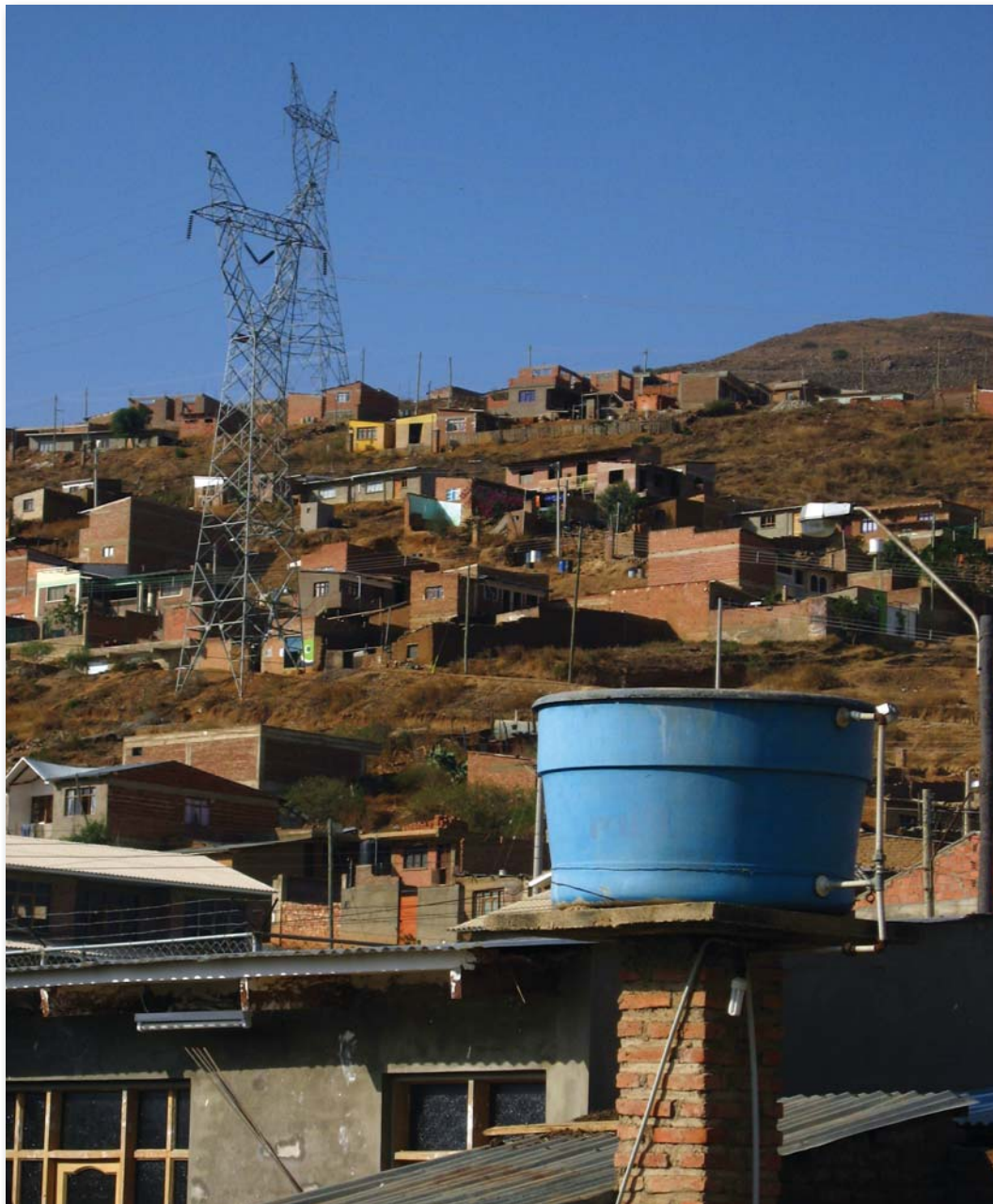


Photo: Crossley Pinkstaff

“The demand for life is the demand for water.”

Right now, our biggest advantage is that we have constructed our own alternative and the commitment to defend it. Our successes so far demonstrate that another way is possible. But the threats continue. Neither the multilateral institutions nor the big corporations are going to yield what they've won, whether those victories were from trade treaties or from government policy.

We women are the most affected because we live with these questions every day. We not only pay the cost of a double working day, but women in the countryside have to spend ten hours getting water for their home. And that makes them pass on the work to their daughters and their daughters' daughters, which shouldn't be their responsibility.

The challenge is how to open doors, doors and not windows, doors and hopefully big doors so we can take over decision-making spaces. That doesn't mean just being present. I am tired of that kind of tokenism in which women leaders are delegated the same domestic role within the board of directors in the water organisation as in the homes. It's not enough to say that women hold a leadership position. We must ask: what is the quality of this post or what kinds of decisions are they allowed to make?

I think a very significant challenge is how we generate more debate about the interests and needs of women with respect to water. And this doesn't just mean making sure the taps run. It's about other elements – ensuring that the policies of the community, municipality or country respond to women's interests and needs.

We have grown tremendously and we have taken important strategic steps, which I see as I've had the opportunity to meet with local leaders. I see more women involved and more committed. And this isn't about generating another double-burden for them of being a housewife and a community leader.

The question is how we move women's participation into the public sphere, how we maintain our leadership, how we strengthen and unite ourselves. I am not at all saying that means putting aside men's leadership. But this is about creating a public consensus that both men and women have equal rights, equal opportunities and the ability to lead this process and this struggle for the defence water. We want an integrated world; we want an alternative that aims for equality for all.

How we in Latin America move towards constructing a single citizenship, a united people? How do we recognise our origin, and how do we project it? We must take advantage of the richness and strength that these peoples, these native peoples, have handed down to us. We must make this our heritage. We must make that conviction and that force ours, in order to confront the giant monster that is bearing down on us. We will not allow it to advance. We must create one single echo of our hope that we can bring to fruition this other world, the one we all want.

The Salvadoran Ana Ella Gómez works in the Centre for the Defence of the Consumer.

THE POWER THAT MAKES PITCHERS OVERFLOW AND RIVERS FLOOD THEIR BANKS

Erasto Reyes, Honduras

“We need power to be born from the communities, from each man and each woman, the power that makes pitchers overflow and rivers flood their banks, the power that overflows in ordinary people, making each of us become greater.”

contradiction: struggling for life, we find death. But that does not make us afraid or decrease our conviction to continue fighting. Water, from our point of view, is a heritage of humanity, just like land. Water is linked to land and also to health. The fauna and flora, too, are at stake, and must be taken as fundamental to our struggles.

You could say that the water wars of South America have arrived at our doorstep. The water war in Bolivia gave us a profound conviction to fight water privatisation. We have gone beyond simply protesting in the streets and are developing alternative proposals to meet the needs of our people. We are expanding the spaces where people – men, women, youth – can participate politically. Every day, more are participating. This has allowed the social movement fighting for water to cross borders, to

We have been working on water since 2000, when we began our struggle against the privatisation of public services – energy and telecommunications. But water has been our greatest focus. Water ignited our struggles in Latin America: the struggles of the Bolivians, the Argentineans, the Uruguayans, the proposals that come out of Venezuela, the experiences in Brazil. These struggles have filled us with hope, and they are why there has been growing popular mobilisation throughout Central America.

Central America doesn't appear in the international context of nations or peoples; we're invisible. When Central America makes the news, it's for serious and nasty issues like drug trafficking, or natural disasters like Hurricane Mitch. But it doesn't appear, for example, when in countries like El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and Costa Rica, people are reclaiming the human right to water.

In Central America, we have serious problems with sanitation and water supply. Honduras is one of the countries with the largest water reserves in Central America, but the state has no policies to ensure access to water and sanitation. In Central America, the struggle for water is a struggle for life. It is a

move beyond the limits of our villages and towns. We are seeing this in the determined efforts of every country in South America, in Central America and Mexico, and – why not mention it? – in the United States and other countries.

The people have governments, but until now, with only a few exceptions, the people have not had power. We want to construct a model in which people have the power and the capacity to decide what they want and what they don't, and that this is not imposed from above. We want our people to understand that they have to be part of our struggle. They have to join the discussion and they have to



Erasto Reyes is at center. Photo: Courtesy of Erasto Reyes



Photo: Crossley Pinkstaff

participate with a voice and a vote, to be actors and not spectators. They cannot delegate responsibility for the present and the future to others.

The Cuban poet José Martí said: “The best form of saying is doing.” So, to the extent that we know what we want, we will do, we will construct. There are only two possible outcomes: either we fail, or we succeed in what we are constructing.

We want guaranteed access to basic services such as telecommunications, energy, health and water. Moreover, we want to live in a world without war, with social justice, with equity, where men don't dominate women, where children don't have to work in cane fields or in factories, where children don't roam the streets without hope. With this desire, when our various organisations come together, we know this movement has a bright future. America is destined to be the continent of hope and life. And our struggles will show that, though we might not experience it in our lifetime, we will have added a grain of sand to the pile.

To the extent that our communities realise this human right to water, they will be building power and sovereignty. Because, as we do things that benefit others collectively, we learn to govern ourselves without bosses or dictators. This new model of community participation also means accumulation of

“We have learned that we must not only cultivate the struggle, but also cultivate hope, joy, and love, and truly live by democratic and participatory principles. “

political power and, beyond political power, social and economic power.

What a law says, what a decree says, what the U.N. says, or what divine grace says, is not enough. We have to make water a human right. Because there can be millions of laws and provisions, but we need to make you, to make me, to make men and women, the elderly and the young, understand and ensure that water is our human right. We need power to be born from the communities, from each man and each woman, the power that makes pitchers overflow and rivers flood their banks, the power that overflows in ordinary people, making each of us become greater. This depends on the people's understanding that to protect the water, to defend territory and sovereignty is to build a new life, a new model of government. It is a process that will not be completed overnight. We evolve from the simple to the complex. Obviously we're going from the bottom upwards, on an ascending staircase that, we hope, will lead us in the future to improve our living conditions.

Out of the twelve themes that we promote in the country through the National Coordination of Popular Resistance, water became the most important one. And that pleases us so much and it has convinced us more to continue fighting because the people discussed, debated, and finally agreed that water is basic to life. And that it is one of the first demands.

Today, after many protests throughout the country, we have an opening with the current president. He is not great by a long shot, but at least he has opened a door, and we have benefited from it. We have successfully proposed a water law that we proposed earlier in 2003, a water law that defends against privatisation and considers access a human right. Under the capitalist rule of law, as we call it, we as the Popular Block have understood that we must participate in the struggles, but that we also must bring proposals; we are not going to sit by with our arms crossed. It was in this spirit that we, together with representatives of other grassroots organisations, brought the water bill to president Manuel Zelaya Rosales. He has promised to introduce this bill to the legislature to replace the law passed in 2003 by the prior government with pressure from the Inter-American Development Bank. The new law will be one born from the popular sectors.

These struggles fill us with hope. We hope in this process to construct hope and a new model of life for our peoples and, of course, a new model of social power, community power and popular power.

Erasto Reyes is an organiser and lawyer. He belongs to Bloque Popular, a national mobilising organisation in Honduras.

THE FIGHT FOR A NEW IDEAL

Nelly Avendaño, Peru

Our main objective is to organise and mobilise the local population. It all began in 2004 with a great deal of grassroots work. In 2005, we decided to form the Water Defence Front. Three years on, we have accomplished one of our objectives: putting an end to the privatisation of water provision in my district, in the city of Huancayo. This came about after a great deal of effort, as not only did we bring onboard the support of the water service workers in Huancayo, but we were also supported at a national level by the National Drinking Water Federation and by various international organisations.

In the case of Latin America, in our Third World countries, our governments are told, “If you want money for these things we will give it to you, but in return you must hand over your infrastructure to be taken over by a multinational company.” In my country, the government has typically been forced to submit to the interests of North American domination. However, these schemes have cost the population dearly. We suffered a terrible setback in the 80s and 90s, when our organisations were dismantled and many of our leaders assassinated, dismissed or ostracised. We have lived through a bloody civil war that, after almost 15 years, practically ruined us. Afterwards, the people began to rebuild the country. Women played a very important role in this.

Women played a very important role in this. While our partners were being persecuted or killed, we took on the role of preserving our communities and taking economic responsibility for our children. It gives me great pleasure to be able to say that I was heavily immersed in these issues, because it meant that I decided at a young age to actively participate in the political, social, and trade union movements. Even at my age, at 50, I still feel the need to contribute. It may be that there are very few of us left who survived these times, because my country lost more than 100,000 Peruvians during the political conflict of the 1980s, and of these, almost 80 percent were killed by the armed forces.

In 1992, the constitution was modified to such an extent that it practically set a neoliberal agenda. We lost labour rights. We lost the right to prevent privatisation of public services. The way was left wide open for the big multinational companies to take over our mineral deposits, our oilfields and gas reserves, all our production, and so on.

All these years went by, until Toledo’s presidency when they privatised the hydroelectric generators, and finally started the privatisation of water, education and health. Having seen the disastrous effects that previous attempts had on our resources, we decided to fight tooth and nail, to give everything we had, to prevent the water service from being privatised.

The struggle itself is important, but if it’s not accompanied by a proposal that will truly reclaim our rights to good quality water, to water service with greater coverage, to water service with greater continuity, then we’re not doing it right. That’s why, after managing to stop privatisation in 2006, we began developing an alternative proposal, “A New Model for Modern Business Management – apolitical, participatory, and under social control”. We’ve been working on it now for almost two years. We have

made progress; our five or six months of work with various leaders and important community figures hasn't been in vain.

Still, every time a new mayor is elected, he pays back political favours owed to the people who have supported him, who have applauded him and cheered him on at rallies and in town squares. So people with no experience end up managing our water and sanitation. Although this is a company that churns out two or three million soles (half a million to a million U.S. dollars) in profit every year, there are still serious problems. The networks are not properly maintained; the water is not good quality; the overall service is poor; there are constant water shortages. Every morning, people call in to radio stations and say, "There's no water here There's no water in such and such a place.... We're calling to ask for water to be brought ..." and so on. This kind of situation made us realise that as an organisation and as a civil society, we had to intervene. We have a problem with the unbalanced distribution of resources, and we really need to completely restructure the company so that it is better managed.

We can clearly see that across Andean South America there has been terrible glacial retreat over the last ten years. This is very sad news, because many people depend on these glaciers and lakes for their water, as it is all part of a cycle. We know that water is like the human body; it runs like the blood in our veins. It passes from the mountain snow into the lakes, from the lakes through channels to underground water reserves, so water really does flow in a cycle. Global warming is having serious effects in the Andes. We are probably going to experience, without wanting to be pessimistic, we are probably going to experience a severe water shortage within the next five years.

This is one of our biggest concerns, and one reason why we need to take charge of public water supply management. Water management isn't only about providing water to households through supply pipes, but also about sustainable management of watersheds. We need to implement intensive reforestation and investment programs so the rural population can have access to efficient irrigation. The shrubs and bushes that have disappeared from many of our river basins need to be replanted. Since there is no environmental policy or sanitation policy, these concerns are not part of public policy in our countries, so they are always lagging behind. We're studying, having meetings, publicising our new proposal, speaking with institutions from other sectors such as universities, professional colleges, the Church.

More than 80 percent of our water sources are polluted, mainly by the waste and by-products from the companies that extract our oil, gas, and mineral resources. This contamination has been going on for decades. There's a Peruvian company that has the technology to decontaminate the water, but the government entrusted the task to a Canadian company that uses DSN technology, as it's called. They will take around four years to clean the water, whereas the Peruvian company is ready and willing to do it right now. It's driven by powerful economic forces. That's why I believe people need comprehensive environmental alternatives, so they can resolve the water problem.

So as you can see, it's a question of maintaining, conserving and protecting our water sources, of providing drinking water that is safe for human consumption, of modernising agricultural irrigation methods. Ultimately, all this needs to be followed by the construction of water treatment plants for sewage and wastewater, so that this develops its own cycle and is converted into clean water for agricultural or industrial use. If our policies don't integrate the issues of water resources, sanitation, and the environment into one, then the system will undoubtedly continue to fail us.

I think we've come up with the alternative. Society's voice is growing increasingly strong in my country; it is showing that we can take control. So why not put everything into this project?

We normally see men as the leaders of trade unions and political movements. Supposedly, this is because they have more time, not being so involved with childcare, because they are used to being in the public sphere and so can better deal with all the theories and terminology. This has always been held to be true. But in the case of something like water, it's the women who are the first to be affected if there's a problem, because we're the ones who deal with it on a day-to-day basis. Whether preparing meals, cleaning the house, or collecting water for all kinds of uses, from the early hours of the morning onwards, women are strongly and concretely linked with the provision of water.

That's why the first movements to fight against the privatisation of the water system in my city came from the mobilisation of 'Glass of Milk' committees. We filled 14 streets with women demanding that the mayor stop the water service from being privatised. And in the streets, they said, "Right on, women!"

The three most important positions on the Front are held by women, and the professional men who are base leaders follow us and support us. I have a female colleague, for example, who is the leader of the water workers' trade union, who was fired because she reported people. She didn't mince her words, but rather named and shamed people involved in corruption, and she's been fired from the company. So she's carrying on, working with us. At her workplace, they called her "Thatcher."

We have taken on not only a gender commitment, but also a class commitment. This class commitment sees us rightly holding onto the defence of our natural resources as a demand. We think that the water struggle has already become a leading issue on the agenda for our towns and villages. It is necessary to develop policies, projects, actions, that is to say, a combination of measures, looking forward. Our dream is that young people will take charge of the whole defence movement, but we want to set a good example for them. We don't want to leave them examples of defeat, but rather positive examples, so that they carry on our work.

I want to have exchanges of positions and experiences with others, because I think that across the world, after 400 years of capitalism, we need to rethink and re-evaluate much of what has happened, at least in the last half of the century. There have been many hopes for transformation and change in different countries and these have often been defeated, and we ask why. We have to start talking about these issues, so that we don't feel that the fight for an ideal has ended, but rather that a new fight has begun. In many political movements, they have reassessed these issues. They have reassessed socialism, Andean culture, the concept of our human right to water. So we see that we can work together, sharing our thoughts and efforts on many issues. And that we are not distant from one another, only separated by borders, because our experiences and practices are almost all similar and shared.

Nelly Avendaño is the president of the Front for the Defence of Water in the Junín region of Peru.

RETURNING TO A CULTURE OF WATER

Guillermo Amorobieta, Argentina

“The equation is: the less water and sanitation there are, the more diseases there are.”

Our trade union covers all the workers in the water supply sector in the province of Buenos Aires. The government of the province had been the water service provider for the whole population, but the company was privatised in 1999 by the U.S. company Azurix Buenos Aires, a subsidiary of Enron. The workers resisted this privatisation, and after two years the company had to leave. In 2001, the government of the province was forced to reinstate this company. Our trade union drew up a proposal for the government, stating that we were prepared to work together with them in order to provide the service, on the condition that the workers would become the technical operators in the new company.

Today, for the first time – at least in my country’s history – we the workers are organised through a trade union, and we are the technical operator in the Agua Bonaerense company. We cover a vast territory, serving 86 cities and 54 municipalities in the Province of Buenos Aires – around 4 million inhabitants. We have invested a lot in human resources and it now appears that man is where he should be: at the centre of trade union action and at the centre of social organisations.

Our public company does not have a typical working structure; it is different in that not only are the workers the operator, but the consumers are also involved. Consumer organisations are active within the company, and have access to information on operations, investments, and work plan priorities.

We have discovered that if the workers and civil society participate in a company’s decision-making processes, then this guarantees transparency. And it guarantees that the company’s efforts are directed towards those most in need of them.

Using this as a framework, we have been able to set up several public-public partnerships (PUPs) with other small or medium-scale companies in Argentina, as well as several foreign companies. For example, we worked in Zárate, a city in the north of the Province of Buenos Aires with around 100,000 inhabitants. A company there had been through a crisis and was sold to private hands. We offered our aid, restructured the company, and today it is a municipal company with worker participation. The company’s biannual elections, and even the president of the company, are decided by the consumers’ votes.

We are also working on another important project. One of the worst problems in South America is poverty. There is a general tendency where poverty exists for governments to ignore the issue of water

“What we have created is a model of participatory management where the workers and civil society participate very significantly and actively within the company.”

water company itself in terms of management and operations. This took several months and required the transfer of several professional and technical colleagues. Our report was delivered to the company's authorities after around a month-and-a-half. All the data from the research is now in the hands of Huancayo Central University, which is going to verify all the work that we carried out. Now we are waiting for all the political authorities, so to speak, to start making all those decisions they are obligated to make, as principal shareholders in the company.

We have just presented the first stage of this plan to the provincial government. And what's more, we did so in a way that was new. We presented the project, we presented the research, and we also presented the financing. We managed to secure the money in order to ensure that nothing could stop this kind of plan from going ahead.

What we have created is a model of participatory management where the workers and civil society participate very significantly and actively within the company. And we are trying to achieve a very reasonable and rational style of management to make better use of the company's income so it can be directed towards

supply and sanitation infrastructures. Lack of water and sanitation leads to an increase of illnesses and diseases. The equation is: the less water and sanitation there are, the more diseases there are. To deal with this, we are setting up a PUP to draw up a huge plan to cover the whole metropolitan area of Buenos Aires – around 12 million inhabitants – to see if, in ten years, we can eliminate delays for all services relating to water and sanitation in the entire metropolitan area.

We also set up a PUP at an international level, with our brothers in Huancayo [Peru] and with invaluable help from organisations such as Transnational Institute, Corporate Europe Observatory, and Public Services International, who provided us with equipment and colleagues. Also collaborating on this project, on an extremely fundamental level, were Huancayo's community leaders and the National Federation of Potable Water Workers in Peru (FENTAP), who are our brothers from Public Services International.

Our task in Huancayo was to carry out research on the region's hydrological characteristics, and the service provided by the water company, as well as the characteristics of the



Photo: Crossley Pinkstaff



Photo: Crossley Pinkstaff

core issues, such as expanding networks to reach poor sectors and guaranteeing water quality. We always say that the better the water quality, the fewer the diseases that have to be treated in public hospitals.

A characteristic of our country, and of South America in general, is that water supply and sanitation have never been on the political agenda. It has never been the government's priority to implement measures that will improve our quality of life. In the Southern hemisphere, they have always talked of those hypocritical social policies where industrialisation was fundamental and we had to join the world market. We workers have had a lot of experience, we have a strong history of struggles, and we know that we cannot ask our populations to resign themselves to being mere providers of raw materials. We know that equilibrium must exist between nature, natural resources, and man's survival, and that we must coexist in a reasonable and rational way.

In contrast, commodification has determined that nature is secondary, and that pollution is an inevitable by-product of modern life and industrialisation. They want to make us believe that human existence is subordinate to an economic cause, and this is simply not true. For thousands of years, man and nature existed together in harmony, without the need for either one to be despised or looked down upon.

We believe that modern life means adapting ourselves to some technological norms but that they must be reasonable. And it seems to us that industrialisation is important to the extent that, on one hand, it benefits man and improves the quality of life. But on the other hand it should not threaten the environment in which man lives; in other words, it should not pollute.

We have a lot of work to do on this, because we have gone through many stages where a culture of industrialisation was promoted, irrationally so. In this context, we believe that the first thing we have to confront is politics. In other words, the first thing we workers must do is to convince societies that they can have a better life without having to destroy our own natural environments.

A second challenge is of a technical nature, because we have been training professionals and technicians in a way of doing things that was Northern industrialist, whereas our social and economic realities are different. Our professionals' instinct, therefore, is to propose solutions that are simply not those needed in our territories. We need to modify our culture in order to go back to valuing our land, our history, our men and women, as the centre of all government action.

We also face a social challenge because in our countries, the political system has always been

paternalistic, with the government making decisions for everyone. We have to go back to the kind of culture where we all take decisions so that the government does what we want.

I think that yes, all this is possible. We are experiencing a situation that was unimaginable 20 years ago: communication networks exist from one extremity of Latin America to the other, and our social organisations have taken on the responsibility for participating in our countries' everyday lives. We are building networks that are gaining in strength politically, socially, and technically.

If any of us participating in the global social movement thought about our position 20 years ago, and thought about where we are now, he would realise what extraordinary advances we have made, and with a minimum of means. Our small groups in each country are bringing about transformation. It hardly seems possible, but even the United Nations has had to pay attention to us, no?

We have achieved many things and we have the means to achieve many more. Basically, we need to focus on bringing about policy changes regarding the issue of water in our countries. We are on the right road because consider this: in South America, some countries such as Uruguay, Ecuador, and Venezuela have already made changes to their constitution, recognising the crucial and fundamental status of water for man. Brazil, which is a continent on this continent, is initiating a whole debate on water throughout its structure, which was unheard of 15 years ago when it wanted everything privatised.

In almost half of the countries in South America, there have been important political changes. Now we have to show the new progressive politicians in South America that these ideas should be taken seriously. We no longer want them to be part of an agenda to be discussed; what we want now is that they form part of government policy. This is a huge step forward.

Our ancestors' culture of water has been lost, and we need to retrieve it. Not only do we need to adopt technologies to guarantee universal access to water and have more influence in the political arena, but we also have to return to a culture of water based on the idea of water being a fundamental part of human beings. If we lose this, we lose our humanity.

Guillermo Amorebieta of Argentina is with the Sanitation Workers Union from the province of Buenos Aires. He also works in the Bonaerenses water factory (ABSA by its Spanish acronym).

KEEPERS OF WATER

Juan Pablo Martines, Ecuador

“We say that when water is still, it starts to lose oxygen and die. So our intention is to be permanently in movement, to give oxygen to our ideas, and transform ourselves into something that our Quichua friends call *yakukamas*, which means keepers of water.”

and decision-making towards a more permanent model of participation, where we can propose what taxes we want, what water systems we want, what public business systems we want.

The process of getting water into the new constitution was done very carefully. At a certain moment, groups that work on water were able to go with nearly 2,500 people to the assembly headquarters, to meet with assembly members to lay out our political perspective on water, but also our concrete proposals. We were able to move from approaching water in declarative terms to approaching water in concrete terms.

In the organisation I work for, we're also promoting a model of cooperation between the public sector (through the municipality), and the community (through the water consumers' committee). This initiative started with 15 water committees, which now number 60, meaning 4,000 families – around

In Ecuador, we now have a proposal for a new constitution. [*The new constitution was approved a month after this interview was conducted, on September 28, 2008. – Ed.*] It recognises the human right to water and considers water a strategic national asset. It declares that water management is public and communal, and it prohibits any process of privatization. It advocates the strengthening of the community-based water sector. After all, there are 4,000 water consumers' committees in Ecuador, which means 5 million people receiving water services. It also lays out a set of principles for a new water management system, which must be run by a single national authority on water, which has already been created in the National Water Secretariat.

Now, what's been really important is that this new constitution has been created by a group of citizens, environmentalists, women, economists, architects, farmers, and social leaders. We've broken with the notion that the constitution is only for lawyers, only for constitutionalists.

We also think that the best constitution is the one that is going to be fulfilled. This one calls all Ecuadoreans to move from voting in elections every two years and endorsing others with our representation

20,000 being served. This model of a public-community cooperation aims to assist water committees in technical terms and in questions of organisation and accounting, so that the management of these systems improves and endures. The initiative has an administrative council, which is the organisation that makes political decisions. It's made up of three representatives from the water consumers' committees and two representatives from the municipality: a town councilman as political representative, and a technician from the water unit. And us as the cooperative, we participate basically with a voice but no vote. Below this, there's a technical team in charge of visiting the water committees, participating in meetings, visiting infrastructure systems and laying out the best thing to do in technical terms, as well as how to discuss internal regulations, how to manage the systems' accounting and how to improve the organisation of the assemblies.

How is it financed? Its budget is guaranteed in the annual municipal budget, with an annual contribution from the water committees. As a cooperative, we initially contributed some financial resources. But little by little, our participation has decreased and the financial participation of the municipality of Cañar has increased.

I think Latin America is recovering public governance of water. More than that, we're also starting to think about what development models we want, what type of state we want, how we imagine ourselves within the state. In the end, we want to break with the fallacy that they've made us believe, that the state is far away over there, and the citizens over here are abandoned and alone, when it's not like that. We are trying to recover the state-society association, how we are part of the state and how the state responds to that society. This is a topic that gives us a lot of hope, but also presents many challenges because there are many groups with power – political, corporate, economic, linked to banks, linked to the media – that have insistently repeated that the state doesn't work, that it's corrupt, politicised, inefficient. But when we start to see community water committees that do work, and when we start to see these constitutional changes, we know it's a lie.

In Ecuador, we say that we've gone one step of the thousand we have to take. Water, unlike other resources, is in constant motion. We say that when water is still, it starts to lose oxygen and starts to die. So our intention is to be permanently in movement, to give oxygen to our ideas and transform ourselves into something that our Quichua friends call *yakukamas*, which means keepers of water.

At the moment, we're still clients, water consumers; we pay our fee for water and we'll see you next month. Now we want to be *yakukamas*.

Juan Pablo Martines of Ecuador works in Protos, a development organisation that works on water issues. Protos is also part of the National Forum of Water Resources.

ALTERNATIVES FOR ANOTHER, POSSIBLE WORLD

Mabel Melo, Brazil

“Our need today is to establish legal frameworks that not only guarantee the right to water and public services, but that also guarantee public participation.”

Before talking about water, it would be good to talk a little bit about the backdrop in Latin America. Since 2000, our countries have undergone political and electoral processes that have positioned us as protagonists in the global movement against neoliberalism. Latin America now has great importance in the struggles against neoliberalism.

We’re called the *aguateros*, or ‘water keepers’. We’re the people who think about integration, who think that water has no borders. This has even led to the mobilisation of other continents, which have followed the example we’ve set through our struggle. We now have a water defence network in Africa, whose creation was very important. We have a European network. There’s a global movement inspired by our Latin American movement to build up the defence of water as a common good and as part of the patrimony of humanity.

We have to start by talking about our victories because – I always like to bring this up – we managed to expel Suez, one of the major water multinationals in our countries. And here in Latin America you have examples ranging from the reclamation of state or municipal service companies to the creation of committees for community water systems. There’s a diversity of views and approaches, and that’s where the richness lies.

I belong to a non-profit organisation called FASE, where we work for human rights and sustainable development. We monitor international trade agreements and put pressure on the government of Brazil to ensure that the agreements that are signed aren’t effectively sacrificing the people of Brazil. This led us to participate in the area of public services and, within that, water. We began to work with the National Environmental Sanitation Front, which involves union movements, public municipal sanitation services, neighbourhood communities and peasants; in other words, it’s a whole cross-section of the population that’s coming together to defend water.

Our movement’s current concern is how we can ensure effective public participation and social control in constructing the model we want to implement, which is diverse. We in Brazil have had very successful experiences with the participatory budget, where the general public debates public works. Our need today is to establish legal frameworks that not only guarantee the right to water and public services, but that also guarantee public participation. I think it is the way forward.



Photo: Crossley Pinkstaff

If we are going to speak about participation, we have to speak about gender. Women are the protagonists in the water movement and in all the mobilisations, because they're the ones who look after the water; they're the ones who have to provide water for cooking, for the children, for the food. But it's still not reflected in the area of leadership. We're contributing towards the training of women – in the communities and in the cities – so that they can also take on positions of leadership in the struggle. Because they, more than anybody else, understand the need for water.

When we talk about an alternative model for the water system, an alternative model for the care of water, we're talking about an alternative development model. It's impossible to think of things in isolation. That's the position we're working from, not just in water but also in health, education and employment. This in itself really constitutes the creation of alternatives for another, possible world.

The Brazilian Mabel Melo belongs to a non-profit called FASE, which works for human rights and sustainable development.

THE CHALLENGE OF BUILDING A PUBLIC COMPANY

Alberto Muñoz, Argentina

“Now we face the most important challenge of all: demonstrating that we are capable of building a public company with the participation of the community, and that this is not just a slogan, but something concrete, palpable.

In Santa Fe, Argentina, we fought for 10 years for the Suez Corporation to leave. So, in January 2006 Suez leaves, and in February 2006 a public company starts up. This public company is formed as a public limited company – a PLC with the majority of shares being public, no? The majority of the shares belong to the provincial state, a minority belongs to the municipalities, and 10 percent belongs to the workers. This process, this return from what was the private model, was a transition – a transition in which even the political class did not dare to say the company belonged entirely to the state. Then, in the provinces at the end of 2007, a new government came to power, more leftist than the previous government, and it seemed that the victory would be consolidated, the company would remain public, with no threat of being privatised again, ever.

But, unfortunately, social participation has not advanced at all. There are formal mechanisms in place to promote participation. But, in practice, they are not carried out. They are completely precarious, insufficient, non-consulting, and none of them binding.

There was a very interesting cooperative movement there in the 60s in places that were not served in the large companies. There were 347 towns in Santa Fe, and many other water cooperatives in Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Salta, that were not registered with the large companies. Since the State did not reach these areas, the people organised in the communities that had good financial situations and said, “Well, the State isn’t going to reach us, but we want to have telephones, electricity, water,” so they organised cooperatives to develop these services.

Those experiences, in the 60s, were very participatory. Today, 40 years later, the majority have been bureaucratised, and they have lower levels of participation. In many cooperatives the political parties have been involved, which is to say that there is a certain amount of ‘contamination’. But in the beginning it was a very interesting experience, and still, today, there are many cooperatives that provide better service than the private companies.

The level of citizen participation in the fight against privatisation was built on demands by groups, both large and small, that were affected by poor service. People were affected by pollution, by the rise in rates, by the fact that water didn't reach them because there was no pressure, because extending service was expensive, because the company didn't do the work. And based on people's concrete interest at a particular moment, a small movement formed. Over time this joined other movements, becoming a bigger movement, and at some point this movement managed to become public opinion. This then influenced policy makers to such an extent that they had to do a U-turn from the process of privatisation and initiate the period we are in now, of building a public company.

To sum up, we have been in this conflict for ten years. It has been very valuable because many communities have been able to reverse a regimen of very strong power politics implemented by international organisations at the highest levels, with the absolute complicity of governments, both the executive and legislative powers. A lot of privatisation went on with their complete support, as well as with complicity from sectors of the population that believed the state was a bad administrator – and therefore, as the people saw it, there would come a time when at least the state would be kept to one side.

Well, once the objective was reached, once this period was over, people demobilised themselves. And here is the paradox: once the company was recovered – in some cases by the State, in other cases by the community, and in still others by the cooperative – rather than staying mobilised, rather than continuing to participate in shaping public policy, many people went home.

Well, now we face the most important challenge of all, which is to demonstrate that we are capable of building a public company with the participation of the community, and that this is not just a slogan, but something concrete, palpable. Unfortunately, this is not what is happening. I think we have to be almost cruel if we are to achieve the objective of providing incentives, encouraging average citizens, consumers, our comrades in the countryside, peasants, to participate effectively in the administration of the company and the development of the process. And, in this new period, as in the previous period, the political community is not usually an ally – and I mean right, left, centre, whatever.

Participation has to be won. It is not simply given. You cannot wait for citizens to come. Just as in defeating the process of privatisation, this new process of managing a public company with social participation can only be achieved through action.

Alberto Muñoz is from the Consumers' Union Provincial Assembly for the Right to Water (APDA) in Rosario, Santa Fe province, Argentina.

A STRUGGLE FOR LIFE

Marcela Olivera, Bolivia

“This is one of the things that we have taken from globalisation: it’s not only an economic globalisation; it’s not only a series of policies being imposed on us. Globalisation is also helping us connect, find each other.”

There have been a series of policies implemented in our country over many years, which together were intended to privatise our natural resources. One of these directly impacted people’s everyday lives, and that was the move to privatise the city of Cochabamba’s municipal water system and all the water systems across Bolivia. Everybody knows how that turned out: there was a huge public outcry against it in 2000, and in the end we were able to reverse the policy. I think that’s where the story that everyone knows ends – you know, the official, romanticised version of what happened – but nobody sees what’s happened since then.

No one seems to pick up, either, on how closely the water issues are related to other urgent things that are happening now in Bolivia. Even though this was a struggle over water, later we realised it was about other things, too. People were fighting to have their voices heard, to get better living conditions. Water is an area where a lot of things intersect. It crosses over into political issues and economic issues in every region and in every country. In Bolivia, it has started to give rise to other struggles that have been won, one after another, and we’ve reached a point now where the social movements have accomplished most of their agendas. I think the fact that Evo Morales is president now is really a result of the water war that broke out in 2000.

But the other battle that’s still going on, that we’re fighting now in the form of the struggle over water rights, has to do with our not being able to put together an effective, participatory popular alternative with social controls to serve as a counter to privatization, to private control of resources. This is a battle that’s still being waged in Cochabamba, but it’s less romantic and not so easy to talk about, because there are a lot of problems with the water company. Things have not been resolved now that the company has been reclaimed. I think this is where the true work lies – work that is harder, unrecognised, and still involves an entrenched battle.

I don’t believe there’s one single solution to our problems. There are a lot of possible solutions out there. We’re not searching for a single model for how to do things all over Latin America. Our realities are



Marcela Oliver is at the bottom left. Photo: Courtesy of the Red Vida

all so different, so diverse, that it would be impossible to say, “This will work for everybody.” What’s happening in Latin America is that we can connect with each other. This is one of the things that we have taken from globalisation: it’s not only an economic globalisation, it’s not only a series of policies being imposed on us. Globalisation is also helping us connect, find each other.

What’s happening now is that we’re starting to connect with each other on a human level. The encounter we just had in the conference here, between people who are so different from each other and whose cultures are so different, was beautiful on a personal level. I think we have to start with the human side of things, to be able to move on to bigger things. That’s the first step, and we took it. To get from there, to bridging the distances between us – not just the physical ones, but gaps in technology, communication, and sometimes even language – is something that’ll come later.

I see this as a struggle for life, where the question of gender is really secondary, since who doesn’t need water? Women need water, children need water, men need water, so I see it as a universal struggle more

than a battle along gender lines. It's true that the role of women is more invisible but that doesn't signify that it is less important in the element of water.

Red VIDA is a network propelled by women. It's a network where there's a diversity of organisations, everything from unions to non-profit organisations to grassroots organisations, but the women are the driving force. I think it's rich that women have appropriated the defence of water. On our continent, at least, the face of the movement is the face of a woman.

Marcela Olivera, from Cochabamba, Bolivia, is the Latin American Coordinator of Food and Water Watch's Water for All Campaign, works as a volunteer in the communication section of the Coordinador del Agua y de Vida, and coordinates internal work of the Red VIDA.

COLLECTIVE SOLUTIONS TO WATER AND SANITATION PROBLEMS

Mariela Cruz Salazar, Venezuela

“The changes we’ve made include: one, democratic participation by the people; two, participation by women; and three, now access to water at 100 percent.”

The Venezuelan government encourages communities to get involved in improving their quality of life. The technical water committees emerged as an alternative for solving problems related to drinking water and environmental sanitation in Venezuela, in a participatory way. We’re also creating structures called community water councils, where all the technical water committees converge to present their problems and offer their ideas. And the government responds to our findings by helping us finance the project.

This really is an alternative because the Venezuelan State didn’t just show us how to carry out the projects. They also gave us training in environmental issues, as well as the conservation and administration of water resources, to ensure that they’re maintained over time, are sustainable, and that we can pass on high-quality water, a healthy environment, and a strengthened planet to our children and the future generations. Where a need or problem related to water arises – it needn’t just be water, it could be a problem of any other kind – the whole community

calls a citizens’ assembly, presents the problem, and then relays it to the relevant authority, in this case the State Institute for Water Resources (Water Resources). Then they come to the community and give us technical advice, and the community, along with Water Resources, diagnoses the problem and prepares projects. Then we devise plans with Water Resources, which take between four and five months to be financed, and then the community itself carries them out.

We’ve learned quite a lot. Some issues only engineers used to deal with before, but now the people, using their empirical knowledge, have taken control of these issues. We’re capable of managing our own aqueducts and resolving our own problems. We’re managing the water as an organised community, not just by receiving the water, but by training the community in how to use it rationally and conserve it for the future.

The technical water committee is really the whole community, but we carry out democratic elections where representatives are elected who then act as our spokespeople with the water councils, or with Water Resources, for the purposes of problem-solving. The person who is elected for this purpose has

weekly meetings with the community to inform it of progress on the applications or requests that are being made to Water Resources.

In our area, we used to have a lot of problems. The aqueducts were state property, but with the transfer of resources to the communities, we are now managing our own aqueducts for ourselves. We were without water for more than 10 years, but now we've got 100 percent access to drinking water. In our zone, the water is free. We don't pay for the water. Certain communities that have access to the service but are really poor pay a minimum fee; in the cities, where people have more money, they pay more.

The government of Hugo Rafael Chávez has placed a great deal of emphasis on the issue of gender. We women have been included now, and we are very proud that we now have a Women's Ministry, which is giving us all the support we need. Because the Comandante believes that women are extraordinary administrators, and that we can do things – not better than men, because both genders need one another. But women play a really important role in problem-solving.

The communities meet, they present their problems and devise their projects, and when the financing comes through, they carry out the work. In some places it's been a little difficult because, in fact, the communities have had trouble organising themselves. It's not easy. We have a history of representative rather than participatory democracy. Even so, it's worked out. The fact that we have 6,400 technical committees at the national level clearly demonstrates the success of the policies. They also raise the profile of women and give them a leading role in community work, because they've done it very well. In Venezuela, women are in charge of community participation.

In my region, the technical water committees mainly consist of women. And we've played a really important role. Now, we're kind of finding our feet in the political sector. In fact, the constitution of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela proposes that 50 percent of political posts should be held by women. We're rising to political posts that were denied to us in the past.

Now we're promoting the integration of Latin American countries, explaining Venezuela's experience in the area of water and finding out about other Latin American countries' experiences, to exchange ideas and achieve some unity, to see how we sister countries can help one another solve our water, environmental, and sanitation problems.

Cruz Mariela Salazar is a member of the Technical Water Committee in the community of Caimancitos, Venezuela.

PART TWO: A COLLECTIVE VOICE

“The processes of reclaiming our water are all, in general, very similar. The differences depend on the level of mobilisation within the communities where each company operates. We have to be tenacious if we want to achieve the fundamental objective of encouraging the average citizen, consumer, peasant, to participate effectively in the administration and the development of the process.”

— Alberto Muñoz, Argentina

THE WATER MOVEMENT IN THE AMERICAS TODAY

The long arc of social conflict over water on the American continent is facing a moment of significant change.

For the past 15-20 years, global policy has focused on promoting privatisation, public-private partnerships, and commercialisation of water services. Public and community sector models and policies aimed at guaranteeing universal access to water were overlooked. They were to a large extent weakened or destroyed by the neoliberal counter-revolution since the 1970s, despite their tremendous potential in the arena of international health and development.

While the policies of privatisation and commercialisation of water appear to be weakening in many places, the dominance of neoliberal economics – the creed of selling off everything to the highest bidder – is still prevalent in water governance and management. As a result, community and public systems remain threatened by privatisation, commercialisation and “private sector participation.” Private sector participation refers to an array of options for private companies to control, manage and invest in public water companies. While defensive strategies and resistance to the ever-expanding logic of the commercial market into the water commons are as necessary as ever before, water movements are also increasingly realising the need to build effective alternatives.

Today, visions for alternative water management are expanding in the Americas, especially where real opportunities for public water are emerging because of political shifts towards the left. The visions and initiatives are aimed at transforming, democratising, and revitalising the public and community-led sectors to generate concrete alternatives to failing water systems, both public and private.

The moment is ripe to shift debate and policies toward building public and community-based management, involving developing equitable and sustainable water systems based on transparency and direct



Photo: Crossley Pinkstaff

democracy, on the human right to water, and on sustainable and effective participation by consumers and workers. This is critical to resist the privatisation and commercialisation of water and to drive forward the urgently needed, profound transformation of existing state and community water systems. Even where alternatives such as functioning community water systems exist, they must be encouraged to join the water movements to engage in the larger political questions.

Alternative water management schemes, which have always existed, are increasingly emerging through community-based systems, cooperatives, democratised public companies, progressive managers and participatory public authorities. Several countries have implemented significant water-related constitutional and legal reforms, involving the establishment of new water sector authorities. Similarly, there is a growing body of experience of democratic water management, developed by many

successful public water and sanitation firms and community and cooperative systems. The strategic perspective and political opportunity for such alternatives remains problematic, however. Even where political will exists, there are rarely sufficient means or tools, or support by governments, state institutions, donors, and international organisations, despite extraordinary potential and many inspiring examples. Clearly, we need to strengthen and democratise these companies and systems.

Public-Public Partnerships: A Solidarity Model of Water Service Management

Public-public partnerships (PUPs) – a collaboration between two or more public utility agencies or authorities – have emerged as bilateral exchanges within and between countries. In water and sanitation, this means a not-for-profit arrangement between a public water operator and a supporting public service provider, aimed at building capacity through training and technical assistance. Partnerships among water operators allow less successful or not-yet-developed utilities – be they public companies or a community venture – to get training, technical assistance, and/or funding from successful utility providers. This both strengthens the public sector and allows for democratisation of the process.

Currently, a movement exists to create a regional platform for organising, exchanging knowledge and resources, and building a broad alliance of these partnerships. Some PUPs have developed in recent years at the initiative of local organisations and with the encouragement of social networks, supported by the Red VIDA and the Reclaiming Public Water Network. Examples include a partnership



Photo: Phillip Terhorst

between OSE, the Uruguayan state utility, and APPOS, a water cooperative in Bolivia; and a partnership between a union-led, public provider called ABSA in greater Buenos Aires, Argentina, and the municipal utility SEDAM HUANCAYO in the central Andes of Peru.

The Gathering in Cochabamba

Over the past decade, a global network of water movements has formed to share experiences and support the continued development of publicly-managed and community-based alternatives. One important moment of collective exchange occurred in August, 2008 at a seminar held in Cochabamba, Bolivia, called “Water: common good, public management and alternatives – Alternatives to the privatization and commercialisation of water.” Organised by the Red VIDA network and the Reclaiming Public Water Network, the gathering brought together human rights advocates, unions, citizens’ organisations, representatives of public companies, community water systems, water cooperatives, and alternative water management organisations from more than 15 countries.

The seminar encouraged exchange between activists, public authorities, and water systems operators, requiring them to work together toward the development and implementation of effective alternatives.

The testimonies presented in this booklet are from some of the participants of the Cochabamba gathering, while the next section summarises the debates and analysis that emerged there. Our hope is that these voices will resonate with you and your community or organisation, to encourage further debate and participation toward water democracy in the Americas.

COLLECTIVE DISCUSSIONS FROM THE SEMINAR: Water: Common Good, Public Management and Alternatives – Alternatives to the Privatization and Commercialisation of Water

Cochabamba, Bolivia, August 23-25, 2008

Collective Evaluation of Resistance

Our water struggle against privatisation in the Americas has mobilised hundreds and thousands who have shown us that another world is possible. These victories, won by women, indigenous people, workers, peasant farmers, and others, have evicted huge multinationals, recovered public companies, shaped national agendas, and placed the issue of water at the forefront of public discussion.

Our water movement is currently in the midst of a critical reflection regarding the road we have travelled, the meaning of what is public, and the public management models we need and want to ensure that water is a common good. The recovered companies have not always responded to the demands and expectations of popular mobilisations. We face cases of corruption, technical and financial weakness, as well as judicial and regulatory frameworks and public policies that create obstacles for an alternate public management that would offer participation, community control, efficiency, and social justice.

Increased social control and democratic oversight of public companies are urgently needed, which in turn require autonomy from undue interference.

We have identified the needs: first, to institutionalise the rules for acquiring staff, the structure of the work force, and worker positions; and, second, to have technical assistance that offers new sustainable technologies and traditional knowledge, and integrates new blood into the labour force. We have found that the battle against corruption and for administrative improvement, under criteria of transparency (of information and of economic management) can allow companies to be financially viable. For this to happen, public policy must encourage a sense of ownership by the general public. Also, social participation is a fundamental foundation for the monitoring and social control of public companies. It is the responsibility of water managers and decision-makers to consider the conservation, care, and management of surface and groundwater sources, with an integrated vision of sustainable water ecosystems.

We need to join forces with academics, social groups, and technical experts; link with other struggles; diversify our strategies; develop and promote grassroots education; and use a human rights-based approach. Our efforts in the face of repression and threats – part of the criminalisation of the social movement in defence of water – prompt us to revitalise our commitment and strengthen our relationships.

The Privatisation Of Water Sources

The World Bank, the World Trade Organisation, and different free trade agreements (passed and pending) create the conditions for privatisation and favour the corporate model. Privatisation is targeted both at water sources and management.

Beyond the open sales of water systems, water resources can also be privatised on the down-low, escaping public notice. Privatisation by contamination occurs through mining projects, mono-cropping, biofuels, and agribusiness, among many others. Privatisation by over-exploitation of water bodies can occur due to a lack of monitoring and control on the part of the state. A broader category is that of privatisation by private appropriation, which describes processes where the interests of a few reduce access for the many. It has several elements, such as a failure to recognise the will and needs of the population when land reforms are carried out. In the same way, the appropriation of rivers, the construction of infrastructure and mega-projects are forms of privatisation because they take control of the water sources and deny specific groups access to water. A similar scenario involving water sources takes place in irrigation systems where access to a common good is monopolised. This category also includes payment for environmental services and the generation of private reserves administered by so-called 'ecological' non-profit or other non-governmental organisations.

The Privatisation of Management and Public-Private Partnerships

Another form of privatisation occurs in the guise of public-private partnerships (PSPs) and related models. PSPs have been created throughout Latin America under the policies of the World Bank. These models involve private capital that supports specialised operators responsible for 'managing the management', while the public sector assumes the debts, the expansion of infrastructure costs, etc. The business structure allows private capital to enter different aspects of management, leading to the outsourcing of the main role of the companies. No different are the public-private-civil society partnerships being promoted by some non-governmental organisations and aid agencies. In the majority of cases, these strategies are accompanied by misinformation and lack of access to funds to resolve water and sanitation problems, pressures arising from conditions imposed by the multilateral banks in exchange for loans, resulting in a loss of sovereignty and control over water sources. In addition, regulatory frameworks are typically oriented towards privatisation and, thus, the interests of the private sector.

Challenges and Problems of Public Management

We define public management as a system of actors who relate to each other and, at times, are in dispute. These can be state, municipal or community actors, citizens or networks. These actors manage a common good considered to be of public interest, and ideally seek ecological sustainability and social justice. Public management is a political, social, and economic process influenced by cultural traditions and the environmental context. The public arena is considered a space of reciprocity, of collective and inclusive recognition.

The role of the state's responsibilities, duties, legal systems, and funding in public management is under debate. There is a need to distinguish between the public and community. There exists consensus that it is necessary to revitalise public and community systems, which, under state and capitalist regimes, tend not to guarantee the human right to water. Also, in the public domain, we consider water services cooperatives that work on a not-for-profit basis and address common interest.

For public management to operate correctly requires administrative autonomy as well as the supervision of a competent public entity. Ensuring horizontal democratic principles, transparent management, marked by solidarity, social efficiency, equality in terms of access, participation, and equitable social control. We must not forget the difficult relation many popular movements and individual people have with the state, which is after all not only as positive provider of public services but also a repressive structure that can act violently and violate peoples' rights. In no case should the state resort to the use of violence.

Public service must be non-profit, as it seeks to defend a common good. As a result, it must be marked by the absence of the private accumulation of capital and, in general, it should confront capitalist relations. Public management must be carried out with an ecological vision that protects ecosystems, promotes participation, and considers water basins as the basic organisational units. Moreover, it should promote an exchange of knowledge.

In order to improve access, there is a need to plan, control, and share the responsibility of management from the communities themselves. In the area of water and sanitation, the state must be responsible for investment. However, we must imagine and construct a 'new model' of state. This includes seeking other sources of funding, since public companies are trapped in the capitalist logic of the international market.

We must convince the authorities that water is like health and education. Water rates must be subsidised, with people with more economic resources, or who use more water, paying more than those who use less or have fewer economic resources. Water management requires equity and a sharing of wealth, so that resources are reinvested into water systems and distributed between different geographic places in order to ensure that all communities have access to water.

Social control and participation have the main objective of addressing social needs. Participation is a form of monitoring and mobilisation, in particular when it includes a sense of belonging. There is a need to create this sense of belonging regarding common goods, taking into account the political space in which common goods are organised. In some contexts, participation can also be considered a form of resistance.

There is also a need to incorporate economic, social, and environmental sustainability into the water systems. It is worrying that the issue least developed by movements and water systems is environmental sustainability. This is particularly relevant given the issue of climate change, the direct result of the squandering generated by the capitalist model that obligates us to reduce our energy.

Achieving just access to water is related to the relationship between the human being and the public arena, integrating and recovering indigenous traditions and their cultures. The legal frameworks must preserve the uses and customs of these communities. Moreover, exchanging knowledge, including grassroots education with social participation, sharing knowledge among cultures, and looking upon

each other as equals is needed. Constructing an inclusive space, of relationships, developing together how we want to live, what we want to do, under the principle of reciprocity and solidarity, is all part of this.

Public Utility Partnerships (PUPs)

Social movements engaged in World Social Forum processes are discussing and elaborating the idea of the PUPs. When the millennium goals failed in the framework of the United Nations objectives, the struggle and work of social movements gave rise to a space in the UN Consultative Council that advises the General Secretary of the UN. In result, the UN is developing a system of Water Operators Partnerships that partially is in line with the PUP concept, but still leaves many loopholes to promote for capitalist and neoliberal models. At the same time, the social movements are together constructing the contents, principles and means to create public-public partnerships that meet our principles and vision.

PUPs are forms of cooperation and exchange that can be promoted by social movements and which allow entities, public firms, municipalities and communities to jointly develop sustainable solutions. They exclude profits for private businesses. From our experiences, three lessons can be drawn. First, the politics around water can hinder good processes. Second, the commitment of civil society is key – ‘the only guarantee’. Third, each local context where a PUP is to be created is distinct in its culture, geography and economic resources.

COCHABAMBA DECLARATION IN DEFENCE OF WATER

Cochabamba, Bolivia, August 25, 2008

From the 23rd to the 25th of August, 2008, gathered in Cochabamba, Bolivia: Human beings with a holistic view of life, activists from social movements, public companies, unions, non-governmental organisations, networks in struggle for the defence of water, territory, and common goods, having shared and debated ideas, struggles, concerns, and proposals over the course of three days, declare that the struggle of our peoples for water is no longer invisible. It transcends all political boundaries with the goal of bringing an end to the privatisation of our vital liquid in the search for a different way of life.

We represent many of the peoples and organisations of the world that defend the human right to water. We are committed to continuing the struggle against privatisation in every corner of the Earth.

In the face of diverse goals, challenges, and opportunities, and following on commitments made in prior years as social movements from across the planet, we struggle for the right to water with a holistic vision, according to the varying realities of every organisation, nation, culture, and people.



Participants of the Cochabamba gathering Photo: Crossley Pinkstaff

We declare ourselves opposed to the commodification of water in all of its aspects, spheres, modalities, and possibilities. We commit to continue confronting this global problem from every locality, based in an exchange of knowledge, experience in the management of water systems, and mutual aid and solidarity to strengthen and empower all peoples.

With the same force with which we struggle against privatisation, we defend and promote the creation of public, non-profit, community-based models of water management, in the service of the commons and the common good, in forms that are autonomous and equitable, with solidarity, social participation, inclusivity, efficiency, and an ecological vision that ensures the reclaiming of all that belongs to us, advancing a popular vision and the integration of all peoples.

Being that:

1. We consider that water and all natural resources are the source of the social organisation, unity, and identity of diverse sectors working for life and for resistance. Water is not a commodity, but a common good. For this reason we reject all forms, modalities, and spheres of privatisation, including public-private partnerships, commercial agreements, and forms of strategic subcontracting which have been shown to fail everywhere in the world.
2. We ratify our bond and complete agreement with the Latin American struggle for the defence of water, the commons, and the common good, and against megaprojects that reinforce the corporate model and violate the rights of nature and all peoples.
3. We agree to strongly promote public-public, public-community, and community-community co-operation as alternative forms of relations, exchange, and solidarity in opposition to the utilitarian logic of the free market. We declare our support for societies that are democratic, founded on solidarity, and in full harmony with nature.
4. We commit to continue supporting, in Latin America and throughout the world, constitutional, legislative, and institutional reforms that promote the reversal of privatisation and commodification of water, and the recuperation of popular water management and the processes that will bring these changes into effect.

GET INVOLVED

Water movements have engendered countless inspiring and successful campaigns, as well as arduous and painful struggles. All are the result and expression of hundreds of thousands of people fighting for the human right to water and its protection from commercialisation and privatisation. Whether based in local communities or at the level of state utilities or national politics, water movements are increasingly networked and interconnected across national borders. At the same time, workers, managers and consumers everywhere strive to improve their water services through their daily practices, without necessarily realising that they are responding to a global call for the protection, enhancement and democratisation of public and community managed water systems. This booklet tells some of those stories from Latin America, with an emphasis on alternatives being developed or in existence.

You can get involved. Seek out information on struggles in the Americas. Link up to people close to your home, to support them and become yourself part of these stories of hope for a better water future.

For more information and to get involved, subscribe to the following listservs:

Waterjustice listserv – contact satoko@tni.org
La Red VIDA listserv – noticias@laredvida.org
Waterwarriors listserv – write to info@fwwatch.org

Additional Resources

Internet:

Blue Planet Project – www.blueplanetproject.net
Corporate Europe Observatory – <http://www.corporateeurope.org/>
Council of Canadians – www.canadians.org
Food and Water Watch – www.foodandwaterwatch.org
International Forum on Globalisation – <http://www.ifg.org/>
Municipal Services Project – <http://www.queensu.ca/msp/>
Other Worlds Collaborative – www.otherworldsarepossible.org
Public Services International – www.world-psi.org
Red VIDA (Red de Vigilancia Interamericana para la Defensa y Derecho al Agua) –
noticias@laredvida.org
The Right to Water – www.righttowater.org
Transnational Institute – www.tni.org
Water Justice – www.waterjustice.org
Water Remunicipalisation Tracker – <http://remunicipalisation.org>

Cochabamba seminar page:

<http://laRedVIDA.org/seminariobiencomun.php>

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Films:

Blue Gold – www.bluegold-worldwaterwars.com/

Flow (For the Love of Water) – www.flowthefilm.com/

Thirst – www.thirstthemovie.org/

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In case after case around the world, water has been turned into a profit-making commodity – preventing people access to the most essential element on Earth. Private ownership of water and water delivery systems has severely compounded the abuse, neglect, mismanagement and exploitation of water as a resource essential to life.

But, as Mark Twain said, “Whiskey’s for drinkin’ and water’s for fightin’ over.” A global uprising is underway to ensure that water is respected as a human right, a public trust, and a part of the global commons. Popular pressure is winning victories – both effectively resisting threats and creating alternatives.

Latin America is one of the primary sites of resistance to the commercialisation of water, and for innovative approaches to water management. As Salvadoran water warrior Ana Ella Gómez says of the Latin American water movements, “We are many voices, one echo. We are constructing a new definition of hope.”

In this booklet you will hear from some of the most visionary water warriors in Latin America. We hope you will be inspired by the visions, experiences, and lessons they have to share, and that, if you are not already, you too will become a water warrior to guarantee that water be protected as the fundament of life itself, for human beings and the whole planet.

Reclaiming Public Water



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