

Privatization of water supply and management

Among the most widespread forms of water grabbing one can find the privatization of water resources and its management performed by private corporations and profit-seeking economic actors.

This includes the private capture and management of the infrastructures needed to supply fresh water to citizens, urban and rural dwellers. This represents an eminent example of water grabbing, to the extent to which it deprives both communities and public companies controlled by the municipalities the right to directly manage their water resources. Accountability, transparency and meaningful participation are therefore severely hampered.

It also includes the purchase of concessions aiming the exploitation of water resources, such as wells, rivers, basins and natural springs, for the bottling and soft drinks production performed by multinational corporations. Nowadays a few multinational corporations and financial groups control the vast majority of the world market of mineral and bottled water. In Varanas (India), the Coca-Cola company has agreed with the local government to set up a major plant destined to produce 1,2 million bottles per day. In order for the private investor to fully benefit from local water resources, the government has denied the people the permission to access to wells where fresh water used to be fetched freely, thus seriously undermining the right to water of local people.

While the demand for water is rising, together with the world population and an ever-increasing industrial consumption, the private appropriation of water represents a guarantee of profit-making. The opportunity for a minority to build up unprecedented economic fortunes, however, condemns the majority of the world population, which is already lacking any access to water, to the risk of lagging behind indefinitely. Indeed, the private grabbing of water management often results in skyrocketing water fees, which are completely unsustainable for the most disenfranchised population. This is for instance what occurred in Ghana, where, following the privatization of the management of the public company of urban water supply, promoted by the World Bank, water fees skyrocketed to one fifth of families' basic income, thus condemning many to fetch water from unhealthy puddles. However, the deprivation of a basic good and a human right, such as water, for profit-seeking, is unjust, illegitimate, illegal and immoral.

Moreover, the profit-accumulation "rationality" often pushes for the unsustainable over-exploitation of water resources, and natural springs in particular, for export-oriented commercial purposes. Such an approach often results in the depletion of groundwater, droughts, environmental damage, increasing desertification, and can lead to the abandonment of rural areas. Indeed, water grabbing is often the real push-factors that lays behind most of the cases of land grabbing. As a consequence, water grabbing severely impacts on food security, let alone food sovereignty, of rural people, as it has been experienced in South-East Asia and in the Sahel.

Protests and demonstrations for the right to water, coordinated by civil society, social movements, indigenous peoples and trade unions are the inevitable consequence of these policies. The most emblematic case is probably the water struggle that took place in Cochabamba (Bolivia) in 1999, due to the privatization of the city's water supply service that was sold to the US company Bechtel.

The soaring phenomena of water grabbing are stimulating a renewed mobilization and infighting that contributes to re-articulate the links between social movements social and environmental rights activists, and local communities depending on the access to water (forest dwellers, fishermen, peasants, rural communities). This trend is certainly expected to amplify in the forthcoming years.