

Latin America and the Caribbean in defense of water

In response to the new privatization attempts, towards the World Water Forum in Brasilia

Friends of the Earth Latin America and the Caribbean - ATALC
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One month in advance of the start of the **Alternative World Water Forum** (AWWF), preparations by Brazilian and international organizations are underway with the slogan "water is a right, not a commodity". The Forum will be held March 17-22 in Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, a South American country that suffered in the recent past a coup d'Etat perpetrated by neoliberal right-wing forces led by illegitimate president Michel Temer. In contrast to the impositions and repression experienced today by the people in this Latin American country, the AWWF has been organized as a democratic space that aims to bring together social movements and organizations campaigning in defense of water as a fundamental right for the preservation of life. The purpose of this global call to the AWWF is to join efforts towards the goal of ensuring water becomes a right, especially in those communities that suffer the severity of poverty, social exclusion and war, and for which water is not accessible due to its commodification, driven by the interests of transnational corporations that support a conservative restoration in the region with their economic, political and military power, through coups d'Etat and other strategies of the neoliberal model.

In contrast to the democratic exercise by the social movements getting once again together in the framework of the AWWF –this time in Brazil—to defend water, territories and people, the 8th World Water Forum, organized by the World Water Council with the support of corporations and financial institutions (IFIs), as well as its founder, the World Bank, will further deepen and negotiate regulatory frameworks and policies for water privatization. World Water Forums (WWF) are triennial meetings with the sole purpose of signing contracts to privatize and commercialize the water commons –mere commercial fairs and tools to advance water commodification and financialization that issue international public policy guidelines, allegedly with civil society participation, which are thereafter implemented in the different countries through governmental allies aligned with neoliberalism.

Since its first edition in Marrakesh (1997), the WWF has been systematically denounced as an antidemocratic space where the biggest transnational corporations in the water sector seek to benefit from political decisions to establish markets around this vital liquid. On that regard, it is wise to remember that at the WWF editions in Mexico (2006) and Istanbul (2009), water was not recognized as a fundamental *right*, but was rather defined merely as a basic human *need*, thus allowing the investments logic to take over and become a necessary condition for the satisfaction of that need, favoring the privatization phenomena.¹

1 The official statement of the 4th World Water Forum (Mexico, 2006) was so weak and unclear about the fundamental right to water and included explicit references to private sector management, that several governments agreed on a "complementary declaration", where delegates from social movements played an important role, which was finally signed by Bolivia, Cuba, Uruguay and Venezuela. The main points in this declaration were the recognition of the fundamental right to water, the defense of public and community management, the exclusion of water from trade agreements, and critical references to the processes built by the World Water Forums. (Arconada, 2006)

In its latest 2015 edition in Daegu & Gyeongbuk, South Korea, the WWF launched a new approach based on Science and Technology as a strategy for "innovation" regarding water policies, aimed at opening new markets. First of all, this approach focuses on information gathering about ecosystems (Smart Water Technology), water-use efficiency, and technology to deal with climate change disasters. Driven exclusively by and for corporations, and therefore monopolized by big transnational corporations, this new strategy also disregards alternatives and other ancestral, historic, public and community relations developed by the peoples around water, and ignores the international debate on technological innovations and management and their use for the benefit and service of the peoples. This debate has been promoted and developed with solid arguments by the Technology Assessment Platform in Latin America - RED TECLA - made up of scientists with a social commitment and social movements, knit together with valuable support from the ETC Group².

At the same time, the WWF promotes the green economy –a view that has been mainly advanced through corporate control of the environment and is regarded as a good business opportunity, while further deepening the financialization of nature (World Water Council, 2015). These two strategies converge in the proposal for corporate governance of water, a veiled discourse for privatization that opens the door for new business sectors to intervene directly in water policy decision making. It is not incidental that good *governance* in Integrated Water Resources Management is defined as "*one where authorities play a less prominent role*" (Domínguez, 2011), and that it opens the door of water policy decision-making to "more efficient" actors, as corporations claim to be. Undoubtedly, this is a new scenario of neoliberal attempts to legitimate impositions which were once defeated by popular articulations of international social movements, such as the green economy proposal of the United Nations Environment Program -UNEP- that was defeated in 2012, also in Brazil, by the Peoples' Summit for Social and Environmental Justice in Defense of the Commons, in parallel to the Rio+20 Conference of the United Nations Organization.

With these threats looming large, the challenges for the **Alternative World Water Forum** -AWWF- are far from few. Let us first reflect on some of the key developments that frame the critical debate around water in the Latin American and Caribbean region. On one hand, the region has been experiencing an unprecedented increase of water conflicts in the last few years, rooted in the advance of a neoliberal model that is handing over water management to corporations and promoting, in addition, extractive and agro-industrial activities that entail the intensive use of nature's bounty -water in particular-, with strong impacts on the environment and the living conditions of the population. Thus, water conflicts are not really grounded on an alleged physical scarcity of this vital liquid, they are truly the result of induced water scarcity generated by land and water grabbing, pollution, poor management practices, monopolization and disregard for ancestral and community management of water commons.

Against this background, the AWWF needs to focus increased attention on alternatives against territorial looting brought about by the development model based on

2 For more information about the Technology Assessment Platform in Latin America and its important efforts for the democratization of technology and popular participation in the control of technologies, please visit: <http://redtecla.org/>

extractivism in the agricultural, forestry, mining, energy and water sectors. The dire consequences of the implementation of this model are widely known, with particularly deep imprints on the water territories of our region. November 2017 marked the 2nd anniversary of the biggest environmental disaster in the history of Brazil with the collapse of the Fundao Dam, managed by Samarco mining company, controlled by Vale S.A and Anglo-Australian BHP Billiton. Sixty million cubic meters of toxic sludge spread through 650 kilometers along the Doce River and killed 19 people, destroyed entire ecosystems and turned a beautiful region into a *biological cemetery*. Meanwhile, systematic spills of millions of liters of cyanide and other heavy metals have taken place in Argentina in the last three years, specifically in the rivers running through San Juan province, for which Barrick Gold corporation should be taken to account. Despite being considered the largest mining accident in the history of the country, up to date it is still uncertain how many liters were spilled in the water basins of the region due to the negligence of the company and the absence of strong State presence. Other similarly terrible events that have taken place in almost all our countries with enormous consequences for our peoples and their territories can be added to this account.

Presumably, one of the developments that will be discussed at the AWWF is the global remunicipalization trend, understood as the repossession of water services from private companies into public hands. Even though privatization of water management and infrastructure including through Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) has not stopped, in many places around the world this model has begun to collapse due to its negative consequences: incompetent monopolies, insufficient investments, deplorable maintenance and corrupt and bureaucratic management. As a result, in the past sixteen years over 235 cities in 37 countries have remunicipalized their water supply services (González, 2015). More than ever before, it is now imperative to reflect upon the notion of the Public, especially in the face of trade agreements such as the Trade In Services Agreement (TISA) that are currently trying to force State-owned companies to operate solely under commercial considerations, leaving aside their common good or public service purpose³ (Barreto & Chavez, 2017).

In this regard, a key challenge is to promote and understand how important community organizations involved in water management have been in terms of a reinterpretation of the concept of Public, aside from and in addition to underscoring remunicipalization. Even though a very positive trend, remunicipalization needs to be critically analyzed against the background of the increasing neoliberal control of most States in the region. There are currently 80,000 community organizations managing water in Latin America, providing water and sanitation to approximately 70 million people –almost 10% of the continent’s population. However, their key contributions to water management and supply have been made invisible and unfortunately in many cases, they have been sucked into and inadvertently used to advance ongoing privatization processes. Nevertheless, community-based water management models

³ TISA does not only force state-owned public-service companies to set their tariffs and their quality, distribution and marketing standards exclusively following commercial considerations; it also imposes "non-discriminatory" treatment of corporations, in other words, that foreign corporations should be treated at least as well as local firms, so governments would be stopped from “subjecting foreign investors to special vetting or from restricting how much of a firm or asset they can own; paying subsidies only to locals; requiring chief executives and directors to be citizens; or reserving certain activities for local firms.” (Kelsey, 2017)

offer pivotal teachings for emerging reinterpretations of the meaning of Public, owing to the relations of solidarity and reciprocity within and among them, and their collective observance of the water cycles of territories, always regarding water as a Commons.

On the other hand, the *fundamental right to water*, a recent key victory of peoples' struggles in defense of the Commons, is now being challenged. Following the UN recognition of the right to water in 2010, new sharp-angled views in the international debate have tried to co-opt this approach and its language, claiming that the right to water (many times tweaked as the right to **access** water) can be guaranteed by private companies. That is the case with the demagogic discourse of the WWF supposedly aimed at clarifying its meaning and scope. In this regard, one of the most important challenges for us is to continue appropriating ourselves and incorporating the full sense of the *fundamental right to water*, not merely dealing with access to water for human beings, but also with protecting and looking after the cycles of nature and the water territories that enable the permanence and dignifying enhancement of life. It will also be necessary to bring into these debate and action perspectives other related claims, such as the sovereign right of peoples to make decisions about the use and management of water and territories according to customary, historical, cultural, spiritual and medicinal considerations, and its deep-rooted links to food sovereignty, seeds and their care-taking, and the nutrition and permanence of thousands of peoples in the territories they inhabit within the region.

Unquestionably, the Alternative World Water Forum will be one of the most important fora in 2018 on which to reflect upon these and other key issues to confront the corporate interests of privatization, commodification and financialization of life. It will also be a new space for building alternative sustainable, democratic and popular solutions around water, and the ideal place to continue strengthening and developing articulations of the struggles for peoples' sovereignty and social and environmental justice around the world and in Latin America and the Caribbean, recognizing that the dialogue on water is a dialogue on life.

Water is a right, not a commodity.

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