

# WATER FOR THE WORLD

With the onset of climate change deepening the world water crisis, discussions about how to manage our water systems, which once seemed wonky, are suddenly attracting increased public attention.

“Unlike oil, there’s no substitute for fresh water,” says Maude Barlow, senior advisor on water to the president of the United Nations General Assembly. “We all need it.”

This dawning recognition of the indispensability of water has raised the profile of a number of groups arguing that we should treat water as a common good. Put simply, this idea means that water is no one’s property—and everyone’s. It is part of the commons, rightfully belonging to all of humanity, nature and to the earth itself.



Across Latin America and Africa, consumer, human rights, and environmental organizations have campaigned successfully for constitutional amendments and laws enshrining water as a human right. At the recent World Water Forum in Istanbul, 25 countries signed a declaration affirming that same right (the official declaration weakly suggested that it was simply a human need).

Here in the United States, a bi-partisan group of Vermont legislators working with the citizen's group, Vermont Natural Resources Council, enacted legislation to protect the state's groundwater. The 2008 law declares groundwater a public trust and requires industries to acquire permits for withdrawals of more than 56,000 gallons a day.

Yet it remains an uphill battle to shift policies and public consciousness to ensure that water is managed as a commons that belongs to everyone. This work is made more difficult by the fact that the principal venue for global water policy discussions is not the United Nations but the World Water Forum, a mostly pro-privatization, tri-annual gathering of government delegations, non-governmental organizations, international financial institutions, and private industry representatives. It is convened by the World Water Council, a French non-profit whose board of governors is dominated by the powerful water industry.

At the latest World Water Forum meeting March 16 to 22 in Istanbul, the dominant view of water-management issues prevailed. Whether discussing the Parisian water system or problems in South African townships, the prescription was the same: full cost recovery, which means that agencies, even public ones, that provide water must recover the full costs associated with delivering the service. This leaves the door wide open for privatization of our water. Increasingly pro-water-privatization development agencies, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), are insisting that consumers pay more for water.

Full cost recovery policy is immoral, claim organizers of the People's Water Forum – an alternative to the World Water Forum advocating that water to be managed as a commons for all rather than a commodity for the profit of a few. Water commons activists point out that the full cost recovery strategy is applied only selectively. Poor users who consume the least amount of water bear a disproportionate burden of the cost. A better system would use progressive taxation programs to support public water systems just as they do public schools.

Consider the example of the Finnish company Botnia, operating in Uruguay. Its production of cellulose products consumes 80 million liters of water per day, using a large percentage of the daily output of Uruguay's public utilities at a low, subsidized price.

Similar regressive anti-conservation subsidies are found throughout the world – especially in the United States – where irrigation water is priced far below cost, a boon for water intensive agribusinesses and a blow to family farmers.

Unlike air, it costs money to deliver clean water, so it's necessary to put a price on its management while taking care not to turn the water itself into a commodity. But the largest users – and the wealthiest ones – should pay their fair share and subsidize water use by the world's poorest families.

### Another Water World Is Possible

Citizens and government officials around the world have challenged the way we think about water. In Bangladesh and Brazil, for instance, public water utilities are seeking public loans rather than private equity to improve water delivery infrastructure. They are bucking the privatization trend, refusing financing from development agencies like the World Bank when privatization is one of the conditions to receive a loan.

Innovative financing approaches like this go hand in hand with new approaches to water management. Local authorities world-wide are beginning to base water governance less around often arbitrary political borders and increasingly around watersheds, through which the shared nature of water across boundaries becomes

crystal clear.. This watershed governance approach has been at least partially inspired by the citizens group Tarun Bharat Sangh, which has shown great success increasing the water supply in this arid region by constructing johads—small-scale earthen reservoirs that help to harvest rainwater and improve the recharge of groundwater resources.

Many other examples of innovative water policies are outlined in a new report, “Local Control and Management of Our Water Commons: Stories of Rising to the Challenge”. [LINK/sites/default/files/WaterCommons03.pdf](#).

Maude Barlow suggests 10 principles to create and manage a water commons.

These principles are broad-ranging, ranging from applying human rights and public trust law toward water management policies to improving conservation and public delivery. She, too, sees privatization of water supplies as antithetical to this notion of the commons. She cites the case of Felton, California, which has taken back its public water system after a failed privatization experience. Cochabamba, Bolivia is experimenting with community-managed water utilities to deliver quality water at fair prices. In South Africa, communities have rejected pre-paid water meters and pricing schemes that undermine families’ water security.

Adriana Marquisio, president of Uruguay's water workers union, insists that public water management must be improved but is equally adamant that water remain a public good. She calls for measuring efficiency not just in terms of liters flowing per second but through public oversight over water fees and system improvements, public health indicators, innovations in community management, and the ecological health of groundwater reserves.

### Flawed U.S. Policy

In the U.S., the principal proposal on world water policy is the Water for the World Act of 2009, which would push privatization schemes through an Office of Water within USAID, an agency which consistently seeks to shrink the public sector.

If passed, the Water for the World Act will further force private investment in public drinking and waste water infrastructure on developing nations, according to Wenonah Hauter, executive director of Food and Water Watch. "Water privatization has proven a commercial failure in most countries around the world because private companies have, time and again, proven incapable of meeting their obligations to both their customers and their shareholders," she explains.

"Reinforcing the role of private investment in the water infrastructure systems of developing countries will only perpetuate the problems that this well-intended act is designed to solve.

Instead, we must work with developing countries to implement sound water policies based on public management of this essential resource.”

In reports to Congress, USAID largely measured its success in implementing earlier water acts by the amount of dollars spent on water systems. Certainly, the recent damage caused by channeling public monies to poorly regulated mortgage companies ought to offer pause about a similar strategy for water. These funds must be channeled to local governments and public utilities (with no strings attached mandating privatization) and to non-governmental organizations working on community-led, commons-based water strategies.

The Obama administration’s performance at the World Water Forum was lackluster. It did not sign the alternative declarations to declare water a human right or seek to move policy deliberations about water to the UN. Whether the administration’s plate is too full to pay attention or it is intentionally repeating the Bush administration’s poor stewardship of the globe’s natural resources is still unclear.

In his inaugural address, President Obama promised to the world’s people “to make your farms flourish and let clean waters flow.” So there is hope that the administration has been too busy to give this important issue proper attention. But hope is a poor substitute for action.

It is still early in the new administration, giving citizens time to press for change. That change will happen when we insist that water debates are public debates about how to best manage our common water resources.

Source: <http://www.onthecommons.org/water-world>