

Rivers of Resistance

Water for Life, not Profit



This report intends to capture the current state of play of the global water justice movement in order to strengthen struggles for public and community water systems. It emerges amid growing water crises in many regions, which have come to constitute a global crisis. It is based on conversations that took place at the “Our Future is Public” conference in Santiago, Chile, in 2022, and is part of the movement’s critical response to and reflections on the UN 2023 Water Conference

While this report was written and compiled by Adrian Murray with support from Fany Lobos and Javier Márquez, it reflects the perspectives of the water defenders, activists, organisers and researchers present in Santiago and features quotations from their interventions at the Santiago conference throughout.

DATE April 2023

ILLUSTRATOR Paz Ahumada Berríos

COPY EDITOR Sarah Finch

DESIGNER Ivan Klisurić / ivanklis.studio

COORDINATOR Lavinia Steinfort, Transnational Institute

This report is a co-publication by Transnational Institute (TNI), Platform for Public Community Partnerships of the Americas (PAPC), The Catalan Association of Engineering Without Borders (ESF), Blue Planet Project, and Corporación Ecológica y Cultural Penca de Sábila.

Contents of the report may be quoted or reproduced for non-commercial purposes, provided that the source of information is properly cited. TNI would appreciate receiving a copy or link to the text in which this document is used or cited. Please note that for some images the copyright may lie elsewhere and copyright conditions of those images should be based on the copyright terms of the original source. <https://www.tni.org/en/copyright-creative-commons-licence>



Contents

Introduction	1
The Global Water Justice Movement	3
The Context: Private Finance to The Rescue?	7
Our Struggles: Resistance and Alternatives	9
Epilogue: The Future is Water	13
Our Demands	15
Endnotes	17

*“Everything begins with water
because we are water.”*

Introduction

At the end of the last century and the beginning of the present one, movements and organised communities and workers rallied against forces that sought to commodify water, and commercialise and privatise its management and supply. Cochabamba, Bolivia, was the first place where privatisation was reversed, in 2000, and where the privatised company was returned to public hands. In 2004, Uruguay was one of the first countries where the constitution was amended to protect water from privatisation.

Movements from Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe came together in existing spaces and formed new networks to build a global water justice movement to share experiences, stand in solidarity with one another and fight back at the global level. Among other victories, this movement achieved the passing of the United Nations (UN) resolution on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation in July 2010. It also initiated water utility remunicipalisations in numerous countries, bringing supply and sanitation back into public hands, and built alternative visions and mechanisms to support struggles to protect and defend public water.

Over time, the water movement learned that defending public water and returning utilities to public hands was not enough and started to focus on democratising and improving public water services too. Partnerships between community-governed water and sanitation systems and progressive public utilities played a key role in this work, drawing on the expertise and resources of both to strengthen democratic alternatives that manage water ecosystems and services for life, not profit. In the process, a diverse range of water systems, struggles and organisations, including rural, peasant and Indigenous communities, were engaged in broadening, revitalising and expanding the scope of the water movement.

However, water profiteers developed new tactics and strategies to increase private participation in the sector. They have been especially successful in capturing global water governance institutions to advance their pro-privatisation agenda. Today, extractive economic development and climate change threaten water systems globally as billions of people remain without access to safe drinking water and sanitation. Despite the consistent failure of market 'solutions', frequently disguised in the language of 'partnerships', global water governance and development institutions maintain that the only way to address these challenges is to further privatise and financialise¹ water in all its forms.

The global water justice movement continues to organise in the face of these threats and to struggle against the growing socio-economic inequalities that restrain access to water on the basis of gender, race and class, among other forms of oppression. These dynamics also differentiate the impacts of climate change and related disasters, most of which involve water and which disproportionately affect those in the South who are both least responsible for greenhouse gas emissions and least able to adapt owing to colonialism and imperialism.

The everyday organising work to protect, defend and grow public — community water ecosystems and services for all, is a burden of labour that is overwhelmingly borne by women.² The water justice movement centres gender and the care work that also leads and sustains struggles against privatisation and financialisation. Water defenders continue to develop and utilize feminist critiques of these processes and are working to identify and stop the reproduction of gender inequalities within water movements and organisations themselves. This is both the frontline of resistance and the foundation upon which alternatives are built.

From 29 November to 2 December 2022, progressive social movements and organisations from across the world came together, in person and virtually, at the “Our Future is Public” conference in Santiago, Chile, to share, discuss and strengthen struggles for public services and the essential role they play in our societies and must play in our future. After two years of pandemic restrictions, the conference provided the global water justice movement with an opportunity to renew our exchange of experiences and understandings; engage in discussion and debate; raise critical consciousness; build new relationships and reinforce existing alliances; strengthen political momentum around the importance of democratic public water management and services; and revisit the notion of ‘public’ by exploring alternative forms of water management.

This report intends to capture the current state of play of the water movement. It emerges amid growing water crises in many regions which have come to constitute a global crisis. It also comes as the corporate capture of water governance and new forms of privatisation and financialisation intensify, as was on full display at the UN 2023 Water Conference held in March in New York. As these dynamics threaten the vital substance on which all life depends, “we are a flowing river of resistance” which seeks to protect and defend public — community water for all.

The Global Water Justice Movement

“We are a flowing river of resistance.”

The global water justice movement emerged in the wake of the Second World Water Forum in The Hague, the Netherlands, in 2000 and has been actively organising to engage and contest corporate global water governance in the years since. This loose network is made up of diverse organisations from across societies around the world including rural and (peri)urban communities, workers and trade unions, peasants, Indigenous peoples, feminists, faith groups, environmentalists, human rights activists, and academics and researchers.

The many groups have an equally diverse range of approaches to engaging with local to global hydro-social relations, including working against, within and beyond established water governance. Their struggles are variously arrayed against the forces of patriarchal, racist, extractive, colonial and imperial capitalism, and unfold across territories, ecologies and natures. They critically mobilise and adapt varying understandings of water as a commons, public good, human right, substance of life and spiritual essence, among others, to fight for water justice at and across various scales: local, subnational, national, regional and global.

The movement has built a deep network of trans-local relationships of solidarity and exchange that have proved pivotal in protecting, defending and extending democratically controlled water resources³ and services. It has played a fundamental role in the global remunicipalisation movement, which as of March 2023 has seen 339 previously privatised water services brought back into public hands or public water services newly created.⁴ It has also supported the establishment of public-public and public-community partnerships and existing and emergent networks of community water operators and engaged with broader progressive movements. Robust and sustained local, national and regional organising has helped the global water justice network to grow in size and strength throughout its twenty-year history.

At the global level, the movement has ebbed and flowed around various initiatives, from leading the campaign around the adoption of the Human Right to Water and Sanitation by the UN in 2010, to organising the Alternative World Water Forums every three years. The Alternative Forums seek to create a concrete alternative to the official World Water Forums organised by the World Water Council, a mouthpiece for water multinationals and the World Bank, which falsely claims to lead global water governance. The movement has hosted a series of Alternative Forums including in Florence in 2003, Istanbul in 2009, Marseille in 2012, Brasília in 2018, and Dakar in 2022, and gatherings at several World Social Forums.

A desire emerged from the 2022 Alternative Forum, held in Dakar, Senegal, to establish a more permanent home for the global movement to campaign for water justice actively and consistently, rather than merely reacting to the World Water Forum every few years. This was the inspiration for the People’s Water Forum (PWF), which was formed in 2022 to sustain and deepen global and trans-local relations of solidarity around struggles against privatisation and for

democratic alternatives to realise water justice for all. The global water justice movement continues to coalesce and develop through the PWF, exchanging knowledge and taking collective action.

BOX

Africa Water Justice Network

Communities across Africa face a daily struggle to access water in the context of commodified water systems, contaminated supplies and drought-induced scarcity.⁵ Threats to water resources and services on the continent include land and water grabs, industrial contamination of resources,⁶ and other historical and emerging water privatisation and financialisation trends.⁷ Large water multinationals have recently identified Africa as a key frontier for investment growth and national governments, encouraged by international financial institutions, have increasingly turned to partnerships with the private sector to manage water resources and deliver services.⁸

Movements across the continent have long organised to struggle against these threats. For example, since 2014, a series of World Bank-backed attempts to privatise water in Lagos, Nigeria — including efforts to legislate support for water privatisation — have been defeated by a broad coalition that built grassroots power under the banner of the ‘Our Water, Our Right’ campaign.⁹ From South Africa, to Kenya, Senegal and beyond, movements continue to struggle against privatisation and financialisation,¹⁰ launching the Africa Water Justice Movement (AWJN) at the 2022 Alternative World Water Forum in Dakar.¹¹ Bringing together regional, national and subnational water justice organisations from across the continent, the AWJN declares that “Water is a Common Heritage and a Universal Right, Not for Profit and No to Privatisation!”¹²

The Context: Private Finance to The Rescue?

“Companies are buying the soul of the people.”

The vast majority of spending on water, upwards of 90%, has been, and remains, public.¹³ In countries where universal provision of water and sanitation has been achieved, it has largely been financed and delivered by the public sector¹⁴ and the trend towards remunicipalisation, bringing formerly privatised services back into public hands, is growing.¹⁵ Meanwhile, rural, peasant and (peri)urban working-class communities, underserved by private and public utilities, continue long traditions of building infrastructure to manage and supply water.¹⁶ This heritage is expressed today in the untold numbers of organisations that provide water to countless people across the world, which constitute another form of public management.

Despite the ubiquitous narrative of private sector efficiency, private water companies fail to outperform public utilities, even according to their own technical and financial efficiency metrics, and private financing is virtually always more expensive than public financings.¹⁷ Any efficiencies (read: profits) used to pay financing premiums and line shareholders' pockets are primarily achieved by undermining working conditions, layoffs, reductions in service quality, and rising tariffs. When it comes to social and environmental efficiency, the private sector also fails to invest appropriately to maintain essential infrastructure, to prevent leaks, or to extend services to communities most in need but least able to pay. Rather, they prefer to use punitive water restriction technologies and tariffs to manage demand and sell expensive and dirty infrastructure like desalination plants to public authorities to augment supply, all of which exacerbate water inequalities. Finally, corporate confidentiality makes it difficult to obtain the information necessary to monitor and challenge privatised utilities, resulting in a loss of democratic oversight, transparency and accountability.¹⁸

Despite this reality, and the long established and overwhelming body of evidence which indicates the failures of all forms of water privatisation,¹⁹ prolonged and normalised austerity through the long recession that began in 2009, and multiple contemporary crises—economic, climate, public health, inequality, conflict—have constrained public financing for public services in general, and water in particular. In this context, the decades-long processes of privatisation and the corporate capture of water governance have found room to grow.

“Let them devastate other territories, but not their own.”

In this period, global water governance and multilateral development institutions such as the World Water Council and the World Bank, private water companies like the French giants Veolia and Suez (now merged), and Northern donor countries such as France, the Netherlands and the UK with a vested interest in supporting these multinationals, have re-packaged their market-oriented agenda through the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Foreign and domestic public development investment in the South is stagnating and is now being channelled towards mobilising and subsidising private finance to close the SDG financing gap.²⁰ Public services, such as water, are at the heart of this privatisation and financialisation of development. It is estimated that at least an additional \$150 billion per year in investment will be required to achieve SDG targets 6.1 and 6.2 — universal water and sanitation for all.²¹ Water and other

public services infrastructure has been promoted as an investment opportunity for global capital, to be developed as an 'asset class,' with a 'pipeline' of 'bankable' or profitable projects that prioritise private finance over public finance and private profits over public good.²²

This global trend has a powerful effect on Southern countries' ability to invest in public services like water, which requires massive infrastructure investment. Debt also plays an important role. Many debt-burdened Southern states are pressured into bailout packages that are conditional on public sector spending cuts and deregulation. This frequently drives extractive, carbon-intensive development to ensure that governments have the foreign exchange they need to service often odious debts.²³

“They go after the best water sources in the territory and look for ways to get into the communities, they promise investments to those in charge.”

Limited fiscally, local government bodies are especially vulnerable to capture by pro-privatisation forces intent on pushing through a market-oriented agenda. Though wholesale privatisation of water utilities has generally become less common, public-private partnerships — whether in the area of finance, supply or management — are multiplying. Like outright privatisation, they prioritise domestic and international capital accumulation at the expense of affordability and infrastructure investments, largely through limiting popular democratic control of water systems. The very similar process of corporatisation, whereby public utilities are run like private companies, is also growing. This tends to entail a focus on cost-recovery, water restrictions to manage demand, and contracting out of everything from bulk water supply and treatment to meter reading.

In rural areas, deregulation, impact-benefit agreements²⁴ and multistakeholder partnerships such as 'water funds', which bring together financial, governance and basin management, smooth the way for water-intensive agro-industrial and extractive development. They undermine local control, drive contamination of water resources and, often, involve privatising water access.²⁵ These developments often underpin the extraction of materials required to supply 'renewable' energy technologies to the North and, according to those on the frontlines, consultation, gifts to community water operators and claims of 'shared value' are new forms of 'green- and bluewashing.'

“Companies deceive us by saying: we exploit, but don't worry, the profits are shared.”

These dynamics only intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. The World Bank's coronavirus response sought to finance and develop public services like water via public-private partnerships to 'facilitate economic recovery'.²⁶ Many states had little choice but to comply: nearly 90% of International Monetary Fund COVID-19 loans granted in the first two years of the pandemic required public sector austerity or tax reform.²⁷ The focus on short-term growth of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) masks the far higher costs that privately-financed water systems place on the public sector, saddling future generations with more debt. These decisions contradict the well-evidenced arguments for democratic control of publicly financed, owned and operated water services and resource management. They also overlook the strengths of public and community operators who were able to respond more quickly and equitably to peoples' needs during the pandemic, minimising water cut-offs as household and community resources dwindled during lockdowns.²⁸

Public sector cuts and privatised services only exacerbate inequalities in access to water and other public services, with a disproportionate impact on women, people of colour, immigrants, and working-class communities, among others. As the world emerges from the pandemic to confront worsening inequality, climate crisis and armed conflict, intensifying and repackaged processes of privatisation and financialisation are subjecting ever more areas of society and nature to the market. The water movement seeks to sharpen its analyses of these struggles, across the socio-ecological spectrum, in order to identify openings that can serve as possible points of entry for present and future struggles.

Our Struggles: Resistance and Alternatives

“Water is written, democracy is read!”²⁹

Within a broad strategy of both contesting commodification, corporatisation, privatisation and financialisation, and working to realise alternatives, a variety of practices and campaigns have proven effective in water struggles. Examples include:

- Community water management, which is present around the world and especially strong in Latin America, including community-community partnerships;
- Public-public partnerships between public water operators, and public-community partnerships between public and community water operators;
- (Re)municipalisation — bringing formerly privatised public services back into public hands or creating new public services — which also reasserts democratic governance of services by workers and users;
- Campaigns at the national and subnational levels to reform policy and legislation and stop new initiatives that promote privatisation and financialisation;

Critical discussions around forms of organisation, management and collaboration, rights and relationship(s) amongst humans and between society and nature, and the labour of managing and defending water systems and struggling for alternatives inform the global water justice movement’s work across these campaigns and struggles.

“We demand respect for the community. We need recognition for what we do, for our historical process. We are the solution to what the state has not be able to do in these years.”

Community water management, particularly strong in Latin America, is carried out by thousands of organisations in rural, peasant, Indigenous and peri-urban communities around the world. These democratic and participatory associations manage the delivery of water to their communities, the conservation and restoration of watersheds, and the care of sources of water supply. They collectively harvest and distribute water in a specific territory, relatively independent from the state or the private sector, working together in partnerships and in wider networks. Community water management is a form of collective, reciprocal and solidarity-based self-management of a common good, often with its roots in long-held customary arrangements.³⁰

Struggles around community management are as diverse as the organisations involved in delivering water. For example, the National Network of Community Aqueducts of Colombia has undertaken a legislative initiative to establish a legal and political framework to recognise community water management. Currently before the country's Congress, the mechanism seeks to establish a clear relationship between the community aqueducts and the state, which recognises the existence of the aqueducts and the work they carry out and that guarantees their autonomy.³¹ In Chile, where water services and rights were privatised by the Pinochet dictatorship, community water systems are on the frontlines of struggles against water scarcity caused by extraction and drought. Their resistance involves a broad spectrum of action ranging from the collective management of water resources to the framing of water as a human right, and the promotion of progressive state policy and legislation.³²

“We are in a country... crossed by a subsidiary neoliberal state, deeply extractivist and racist.”

However, perspectives on the state in the water justice movement vary according to distinct historical and geographical experiences of struggle. In practice, approaches range from critical collaboration with public water utilities to remunicipalise and reform services in a progressive direction to rejecting such collaboration in favour of community water management. Organisations who take the latter approach closely guard their autonomy and are understandably wary of, or openly hostile towards, the state, as an apparatus that in many societies has frequently been captured by capital or other regressive forces responsible for widespread exploitation, expropriation and repression, involving many forms of violence.

This is especially true of those systems grounded in Indigenous traditions which view water management as part of recovering cultural practices and symbols, ancestral territories and ecosystems, among a multiplicity of life spheres, reconstituting themselves as Indigenous peoples in the process. Other frontline communities similarly speak of the commons as not only encompassing water and other natural resources, but also the communities who, in a respectful interaction, engage in the common care of wider ecosystems and their human and non-human inhabitants. This is not to say that relatively autonomous community water systems are uncritically celebrated. On the contrary, these alternative forms of water management are also subject to consistent conceptual and practical critique, from the need to improve technical capacity or performance to improving socio-ecological efficacy and gender equality in operations and services.³³

“Water is delivered in solidarity.”

Partnerships between public utilities and community water systems are increasingly promoted.³⁴ These ‘public-community partnerships’ can be mutually beneficial. Public water utilities, workers and their unions can offer communities a variety of resources including technical expertise and solidarity, important for fending off private interests, while the latter tend to demonstrate the participation and democratisation desperately needed in many public water operators. Water operators and other community organisations have also played an important role in the 339 cases of water (re)municipalisation, including both deprivatisations and the creation of new water services, recorded over the past two decades around the world.³⁵

Common within the water movement, then, is a critical perception of the organisational location and structure of water systems, but especially of the state and public institutions. Transforming the state is an ongoing struggle, while at the same time, the extent to which it is captured by the forces of capital narrows the political space for transformation.

“We are nature.”

Campaigns to defend and expand democratic and participatory water systems can slow down, stop and reverse processes that seek to facilitate corporate capture. These campaigns provide opportunities for progressive victories and space for movements to build infrastructure against, within and beyond existing state, market and governance institutions.³⁶ The Human Right to Water is increasingly used as a common framing in these campaigns, although it too is perceived and used differently across the water movement according to diverse struggle histories and geographies.³⁷ Whether it is invoked alongside the language of the public or the commons, the right to water is widely understood more broadly than as a narrow individual right. Rather, as the Colombian water movement articulates, to take just one example, it is seen as multidimensional, including individual, collective and democratic self-management rights.³⁸ Likewise, the right to water is integrated within more expansive struggles for water justice, which cut across the notion of ‘rights holders’ and ‘duty bearers’ set out in human rights language.

Like other expansive notions of rights, including biocultural and Indigenous rights, conceptions of the Human Right to Water, and its strengths and limitations, are mediated by conflict with legal and legislative institutions, and by diverse understandings of the relationship(s) between humans and between society and nature. For example, rather than an anthropocentric idea of the ‘rights of nature’, a socio-ecological notion of human and non-human nature as co-dependent parts of a larger whole predominates in the water movement. Although marginal beyond the movement, these more expansive understandings of rights foreground both the social, ecological and economic transformation necessary to reverse the perpetuation of water and other forms of inequality, and the agency of those engaged in these struggles and in the practice of collective water management understood as a set of reciprocal or mutual, common obligations.³⁹

These struggles simultaneously involve the theorisation of social transformation and the collective generation of other knowledge, including critiques of corporate governance and political economy and narratives that challenge dominant conceptions of the public sector as slow and inefficient and the private sector as inherently more efficient, dynamic and innovative. This is a difficult task given our daily experiences in capitalist society(ies) and the strength of private corporations and finance. Finally, these struggles and practices also facilitate the formation of new organisations, the deepening of relationships with other sectoral movements, and the growth of the collective leadership necessary to advance water struggles and a new generation of water defenders.

*“Water,
labour, care.”*

Labour is central to realising just water futures. In patriarchal capitalist societies, the burden of work to ensure access to water and manage water resources is inequitably and disproportionately placed on women. Already increasing in

the context of intensifying inequality, economic and climate crises, this burden exploded during the pandemic as more care was required to address the health-related impacts of COVID-19, government responses to the pandemic, and their many indirect effects.⁴⁰

More generally, women have been at the frontline of defending water as a common good, public service and human right, fighting against its commodification and privatisation, and responding to water-related impacts of climate change.⁴¹ Most community water systems and resources around the world are run by women. Even when not directly involved in managing water systems, women are deeply affected by lack of access to or control over water supplies and resources. Often, they are also the activists and organisers who keep water and sanitation providers, extractive corporations and public institutions accountable. However, women's participation, as water users and workers, is not matched with adequate access to or control over decision-making or to the political, cultural and material benefits of their labour. This gender injustice is not only present in societies generally, but also within our organisations and movements.⁴² Women's relationship(s) with water must be both recognised and transformed.

*“Weaving
Feminisms and
alternative
masculinities.”*

This politics of water work as care work — at household, community, organisational and ecosystem/territorial scales — can cut across public-private and market-community-state divides. It is a potential basis upon which understandings of water as an essential good, produced largely by women's labour, which provides enormous benefits across our societies, can spread. Recognising water work as care work provides a window through which critical consciousness can be raised and the infrastructures of dissent and alternatives can be transformed and built anew.

The global water justice movement has committed to putting this transformative politics into practice in at least three dimensions. First, movement practice seeks to foreground the labour and leadership of women everywhere.⁴³ Centring gender and care work in struggles against water commodification, privatisation and financialisation, and standing in solidarity with women water defenders, workers and community water managers, is a practical politics. It builds bridges across sectors — water, food, housing, etc.— and spheres: public and private, home and community. This organising strategy illuminates the intensified burden austerity and privatisation place on households and communities, with a disproportionate impact upon women. It also highlights women's agency and labour in struggles against these injustices and for alternatives.

Second, there is an ongoing process of engaging with the reproduction of gender inequalities through heteropatriarchal capitalist social relations within water movements and organisations themselves. This process of organisational reflection and transformation is happening at multiple levels within the water movement(s). It involves the creation of spaces for listening, reflection and unlearning through mapping the tensions, dynamics and practices that maintain unequal gender relations, whether they be gendered divisions of labour, alliances or relationships which exclude people based on gender, gender-based violence, or limitations on the agency of feminised bodies.

Finally, movement strategy and tactics are increasingly informed by a feminist critique of water privatisation and financialisation, itself embedded in a broader critical analysis of the political economy of water. These explorations are not limited to the heteronormative gender binary but rather seek to map tensions in social organisations from a feminist perspective that views gendered oppression as mutually constituted by other harmful social relations, such as racist, colonial and capitalist exploitation, alongside other forms of oppression and domination.⁴⁴ Through this process, the movement seeks to transform how individuals, households and communities understand the impacts of water privatisation in order to share the labour of resistance and building alternatives, including the work of everyday life and of organising to fight back and realise a different relationship to water for all.

Epilogue: The Future is Water

In March 2023, the global water justice movement coordinated a global campaign around the UN 2023 Water Conference — officially the 2023 Conference for the Midterm Comprehensive Review of Implementation of the UN Decade for Action on Water and Sanitation (2018–2028) — held in New York and the first UN conference on water in 46 years. The People’s Water Forum launched a global call to action and campaign in the run up to the conference, urging water movements around the world to engage and contest this important event.⁴⁵

The PWF participated in the Conference plenaries, thematic dialogues and special events in New York and hosted several official virtual side events. The movement also co-authored a Water Justice Manifesto to amplify the voices of water defenders and frontline communities and to call on all those present at the Conference to address issues fundamental to achieving water justice for all.⁴⁶ The Manifesto marks a milestone as a broader spectrum of networks, many previously hesitant to take a strong stance against privatisation, were drawn into the process and signed on.

Garnering the support of more than 600,000 individual and 500 organisational signatories by the Conference’s end, the Manifesto was launched at an event in New York and presented to the UN Special Rapporteurs on the Rights to Water and Sanitation, Pedro Arrojo-Agudo, and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, José Francisco Calí Tzay, and the Dutch Conference director, Nathalie Olijslager, one of the two official country hosts of the conference. After persistent organising efforts, and with the support of the Special Rapporteurs and select Southern UN Member States, the PWF claimed space in the High-Level Segment in the General Assembly Plenary Hall on 23 March to deliver this historic appeal.⁴⁷

Among the central aims of the Manifesto, and the movement’s efforts around the Conference, was to challenge both the exclusion of water defenders and frontline communities from the proceedings, and the increasingly dominant new forms of privatisation and financialisation promoted at it. The Conference was unique in that it was organised under the auspices of the UN General Assembly and not by UN bodies or adjacent organisations entirely captured by

private corporations and finance. While this fact held out a sliver of possibility for progressive action, the latter actors dominated Conference preparatory consultations, documentation and the event itself. Appropriating the language of 'justice' and 'the commons' to repackage failed proposals such as multi-stakeholder governance and public-private partnerships, they used the event to advocate for increased private finance and participation in water systems. Meanwhile, progressive voices, especially those from the South, were disproportionately denied access to the proceedings. In the end, the Conference failed to produce adequate institutional or enforcement mechanisms to protect water ecosystems and limit, let alone prevent, profit making in the sector.

“Water is a common good, it is not a commodity, it is an ecosystem.”

The lacklustre outcomes of the UN Conference come at a time when water is increasingly at the centre of discussions about how to address global climate, social and economic crises. As our comrade, UN Special Rapporteur Pedro Arrojo-Agudo, remarked in his message on Water Day at the 2022 UN Climate Change Conference, COP27, 90% of climate disasters are water related.⁴⁸ This, he said, must be a key axis around which we address climate adaptation, with a focus on those most affected by current and future disasters, as the impacts of climate change are already being felt around the world. Indeed, water is a key resource for virtually all sectors of the 'economy', an industrial input and a medium for transporting goods and people. But it is especially vital for food production, health, care, housing and a wide range of other activities necessary for human and non-human life.

The corporate capture of water governance and finance that took centre stage at the UN Conference is mirrored in global efforts to address climate change. These agendas both look to subordinate ecologies everywhere to the logic of the market, ostensibly in the interests of 'sustainable development'. We are told that the private sector, especially private finance, is the only solution to the existential and interwoven climate and water crises. Meanwhile, despite persistent public sector austerity, public and community water operators continue to manage and provide water to the majority of those with access around the world. Unlike private utilities, public water systems are able to operate based on social rather than economic efficiency, and have, at their best, long demonstrated their success. Valuing water more broadly than on market terms, and in a manner which integrates other 'sectors' such as climate, care and food, offers the possibility of prioritising essential and high *social* value uses. This can have enormous positive impacts on human and planetary life, in contrast to systems that divert water to high financial value uses that degrade water resources and exclude vast portions of humanity from access.

The current and looming impacts of the water and climate crises, and the increasingly intertwined nature of their governance and finance, present both a challenge and an opportunity for water and other related movements across society. Just as water flows through all life, connecting its defenders, it can form a base from which to contest destructive economies and the global finance, trade and debt architecture that harms climate, water and the realisation of other essential human needs. Participatory, democratic transformations to water systems thus have the potential to connect struggles across our societies

and contribute to building the strength necessary to prompt the massive public investments needed to transition away from extractive, emissions-intensive economies.

Rather than facilitating capital accumulation, public investment in public and community water systems can and must be at the centre of the transition to socio-ecologically sustainable futures oriented towards the flourishing of all life. Building transformative social relations that flow far beyond the water 'sector', these alternatives give us a glimpse of the possibilities to organise regenerative futures.

Our Demands

- Water services and resources should never be commodified, corporatised, privatised or financialised.
- Universal, guaranteed access for all to clean water sufficient not just for survival but for flourishing.
- Prioritise redressing historical and contemporary injustice and oppression, particularly sex/gender oppression, as the labour of accessing, managing and defending water falls disproportionately on the shoulders of women.
- Decent jobs, wages and working conditions for water workers.
- Ratification of the UN Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and of Peasants.
- The restoration and/or territorial restitution of the relationship between food production and water, care of water quantity and quality and defence of aquifers and territorial water resources.
- Equitable management of water resources; supply and distribution for socially and ecologically sustainable consumption rather than overproduction for profit.
- Recognition, respect and support for community water operators.
- Participatory, transparent and democratic governance of public and communal water services and resources, with an emphasis on the local territorial level.
- Socially sustainable, long-term public financing of water.
- Debt cancellation and an end to Investor-State Dispute Settlement Mechanisms in trade and investment agreements and conditionalities on loans, all of which remove democratic control of water and trap states and communities in privatisation contracts and extractive and exploitative development trajectories.
- Honouring and expansion of the binding agreement of Escazu, 2021, which establishes the right of access to information, public participation and decision-making regarding the environment in Latin America.
- Legal resources for public water systems to defend regulatory frameworks and legislation from the influence of private actors.
- An end to the corporate capture of global water governance spaces and the recognition of a People's Water Forum.

This list of demands was developed during the "Our Future is Public" conference in Santiago, Chile in 2022.

This publication was a collective effort reflecting the struggles and perspectives of water defenders, activists and organisers from around the world including: Acción para el Medioambiente y Desarrollo, Colombia; Africa Water Justice Network; Alianza Territorial Mapuche, Chile; Sindae Campinas, Brazil; Blue Planet Project; Corporate Accountability International; Corporate Accountability & Public Participation Africa; Corporación Ecológica y Cultural Penca de Sábila, Colombia; ENCANDILANDO feminist collective, Chile; European Water Movement; Federación de Trabajadores del Agua Potable y Alcantarillado del Perú; Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua; Ingeniería Sin Fronteras, Catalonia; Movimiento de Defensa por el acceso al Agua, la Tierra y la Protección del Medioambiente, Chile; Movimiento de Mujeres en Defensa de la Madre Tierra y el Territorio, Mexico; Movimiento por el Agua y los Territorios, Chile; Observatório Nacional dos Direitos à Água e ao Saneamento, Brazil; Petorca, Chile; Plataforma de Acuerdos Público Comunitarios de Las Américas; Public Services International; Red Vigilancia Interamericana para la Defensa y Derecho al Agua; and the Transnational Institute.

Endnotes

1. "The term 'financialization', as a global phenomenon that dominates the economy as a whole, is used to refer to water management as a financial asset whose value is managed in the financial markets, in particular in futures markets, under the speculative logic and strategies that dominate this type of market, with large banks and institutional investors as the main players. It is also used to express the growing influence of these financial actors in the development of infrastructure for water, sanitation and hygiene services." [Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation. 2021. Risks and impacts of the commodification and financialization of water on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation. A/76/159, July 16.](#)
2. Our use of 'women' in this report, refers to all who identify as women. We challenge "traditional ideas of what and who a woman is and can be and the links of women to a system of patriarchy, where women are, in effect, subject to men or a sub-category of men." [Urgent Action Fund Africa. Strategic Compass: 2021-2030 Centering African Women: Feminist R/Evolution in Action.](#); Yeni, S., F. Brandt and K. Benson. 2022. [Womn + Water in Africa: An Overview of Water Justice Struggles.](#) Urgent Action Fund Africa.
3. The term 'water resources' used in this report is inclusive of conceptions of water territories, ecologies or ecosystems, understanding humans as a part of nature, with each relationally produced through socio-natural processes.
4. For more information, see the [Transnational Institute \(2021\). Public Futures. Global database of de-privatised public services.](#) (filter: water, remunicipalisation and municipalisation)
5. Scheba, S. et al. 2021. [New Packaging, Same Deal: City of Cape Town's New Proposal to Replace Water Management Devices with the Drip System will further Water Apartheid.](#) Blue Planet Project.
6. Mousseau, F. 2022. [Drying out African Lands. Expansion of Large-Scale Agriculture Threatens Access to Water in Africa.](#) Oakland Institute.
7. Bigger, P. et al. 2022. [Financialization, Debt and Water in Africa.](#) Climate and Community Project, the McHard Center and the Blue Planet Project.
8. PSI. 2022. [Veolia and Suez: The New Face of the Water Giants.](#) Public Services International.
9. CAPP. 2022. [Our Water, Our Right.](#) Corporate Accountability and Public Participation Africa.
10. Gupta, N., and A. Ige. 2022. [Africa Must Rise and Resist Water Privatisation.](#) Corporate Accountability and Public Participation Africa.; Yeni, Brandt and Benson. 2022. [Women + Water in Africa.](#)
11. Benson, Koni, and Meera Karunanathan. 2022 "Counter Streams: Organizing the Dakar 2022 Alternative World Water Forum." [Transition 133: 147–173.](#)
12. [Africa Water Justice Network. 2022. Dakar Declaration - Formation of the Africa Water Justice Network; AWJN 2022. Twelve Years after the Recognition of the Human Right to Water by the UN, Countries Need to Make More Efforts to Widen Access.](#)
13. McDonald, D.A.; Marois, T. and Spronk, S. 2021. [Public banks + public water = SDG 6? Water Alternatives 14\(1\): 117–134.](#)
14. Hall, D. and E. Lobina. 2012. [Financing water and sanitation: public realities.](#) Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU).
15. TNI. [Public Futures.](#)
16. Olivera, Marcela and Stefano Archidiacono. 2021. [Autogestión, reclaiming the right to self-management of water.](#) *Flows.*
17. Hall, D. and T.A. Nguyen, 2018. "Economic benefits of public services", [RWER, 84: 100-153.](#)
18. Hall, D. 2015. [Why public-private partnerships don't work: The many advantages of the public alternative.](#) PSIRU.
19. Hall, D., and E. Lobina. 2006. [Pipe Dreams. The failure of the private sector to invest in water services in developing countries.](#) PSIRU.; Hall and Nguyen. [Public Services.](#)
20. The SDG financing gap is estimated to have grown from \$2.5 to \$4.2 trillion per year through the COVID-19 pandemic. [OECD. 2020. Global Outlook on Financing for Sustainable Development 2021.](#) Paris: OECD.
21. [World Bank. 2017. Reducing inequalities in water supply, sanitation, and hygiene in the era of the sustainable development goals: Synthesis report of the WASH poverty diagnostic initiative.](#) Washington, DC: World Bank.
22. [OECD. 2022. Financing a Water Secure Future. OECD Studies on Water.](#) Paris: OECD.
23. [Táiwò, O. and P Bigger. 2022. Debt Justice and Climate Reparations.](#) Climate and Community Project.
24. Impact-benefit agreements allegedly provide benefits to communities to balance often harmful impacts of development.

25. Oakland Institute. African Lands.
26. World Bank. 2020. COVID-19 Crisis Response Approach Paper : Saving Lives, Scaling-up Impact and Getting Back on Track. Washington, D.C. : World Bank.
27. Oxfam, 2022. Behind the numbers: a dataset exploring key financing and fiscal policies in the IMF's COVID-19 loans.
28. McDonald, D.A., T. Marois and S. Spronk. 2021. *Public Water and Covid-19: Dark Clouds and Silver Linings*. MSP, TNI, CLACSO.
29. A translation of the Spanish slogan "*¡Se escribe agua. Se lee democracia!*", it refers to the democratic process of public-community water management. Therefore, when people speak or write about water, they're referring to this democratic practice.
30. Olivera and Archidiacono, *Autogestión*.; Plataforma de Acuerdos Público Comunitarios de Las Americas.
31. RED Nacional de Acueductos Comunitarios Colombia. 2022. Radicación Proyecto de Ley por la Gestión Comunitaria del Agua.
32. Nicolas-Artero, C., 2016. Las organizaciones comunitarias de agua potable rural en América Latina: un ejemplo de economía substantiva. Polis. Revista Latinoamericana, 15(1); Blue Planet Project. 2021. Dignity of the waters, a Blue Community in Chile.
33. Olivera and Archidiacono, *Autogestión*.
34. Fiasconaro, M. 2020. 'Knowledge creation and sharing through public-public partnership in the water sector' in S. Kishimoto, L. Steinfort, O. Petitjean eds. *The Future is Public: Towards Democratic Ownership of Public Services*, pp 191–200. Amsterdam: TNI; Márquez Valderrama, J., L. Mondragón Pérez and B. Salazar Restrepo. 2016. *Public-Community Partnerships in Latin America: An alternative vision for improving the water sector*. Water Justice Toolkit. BPP et al.
35. McDonald, D.A., and E. Swyngedouw. 2019. Special Issue: Remunicipalization: The Future of Water Services? *Water Alternatives*; TNI. *Public Futures*.; Kishimoto, S., E. Lobina and O. Petitjean eds. 2015. *Our Public Water Future: The global experience with remunicipalisation*. Amsterdam: TNI et al.
36. Gupta and Ige. *Resist Water Privatisation*.; Moore. M. 2018. *Wellsprings of Resistance: Struggles over water in Europe*. Brussels: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung.; Spronk. S., C. Crespo and M. Olivera. 2012. 'Struggles for water justice in Latin America: Public and 'social-public' alternatives' in D.A. McDonald and G. Ruiters eds *Alternatives to Privatization: Public Options for Essential Services in the Global South*, pp.421–452.
37. Heller, L. 2022. *The Human Rights to Water and Sanitation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.; Karunanathan, M. 2019. "Can the human right to water disrupt neoliberal water policies in the era of corporate policy-making?." *Geoforum* 98: 244–253.
38. RED Nacional de Acueductos Comunitarios Colombia. 2020. Los acueductos comunitarios y las tres dimensiones del derecho al agua. Propuesta desde la Ley Propia.
39. Olivera and Archidiacono, *Autogestión*.
40. Spronk, S. 2021. 'The Struggle for Water Justice is a Struggle for Gender and Racial Justice' *The Socialist Project: The Bullet*. March 19.
41. Yeni, Brandt and Benson. *Womn + Water in Africa*.
42. Olivera and Archidiacono, *Autogestión*.
43. African Ecofeminist Collective. 2022. *Water struggles, anti-capitalist resistance to privatization and organizing politics in Africa, a People's History Poster Series*; Yeni, Brandt and Benson. *Womn + Water in Africa*.
44. Ibid.
45. PWF. 2022. *Call to action: UN 2023 Water Conference*. People's Water Forum.
46. PWF et al. 2023. *Water Justice Manifesto*. Peoples Water Forum et al.
47. PWF et al. 2023. Presentamos el Manifiesto por la Justicia del Agua ante la Asamblea General de la ONU.
48. UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights to Drinking Water and Sanitation. 2022. *COP 27: a message from the Special Rapporteur*.

This report intends to capture the current state of play of the global water justice movement in order to strengthen struggles for public and community water systems. It emerges amid growing water crises in many regions, which have come to constitute a global crisis. It is based on conversations that took place at the “Our Future is Public” conference in Santiago, Chile, in 2022, and is part of the movement’s critical response to and reflections on the UN 2023 Water Conference.

