

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF WATER PRIVATISATION



**AND
ANTI-PRIVATISATION
STRUGGLES
IN SOUTH AFRICA**



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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Commodity

Within a capitalist economy, a commodity is any good, service and/or idea produced by human labour which is then offered as a product for general sale on the market. Put differently, a commodity is created when economic value is assigned to something not previously considered in economic terms.

Commodification

Refers to the expansion of capitalist market trade to previously non-market areas, and to the treatment of things (goods, services etc.) as if they were a tradable commodity. The logical implications of the drive to commodification are the formal privatisation (in whatever form) of services and the fragmentation of the public sector.

Commons

The original meaning of the term comes from the way communities in medieval Europe managed land that was held 'in common' (i.e., shared) and for which a clear set of rules was developed by the community about how it was to be used. Over time, the term has taken on several meanings. In its most widely used sense, the 'commons' refers to a broad set of resources, natural and cultural, that are shared by many people (for example, water, forests) but it can also be used for a broader set of domains, such as knowledge commons, digital commons, health commons etc.

Corporatisation/corporatist

The process by which state and public assets, enterprises, agencies and organisations are transformed and restructured into corporations or independent commercial companies. It can also refer to the way in which politics and governance come to reflect the core features and practices of a corporation (e.g. of profit-seeking, of trading in commodities, of accumulating wealth); this is often referred to as 'commercialisation'.

Cost recovery

Refers directly to the tariff revenue (rates) charged to citizens/consumers that is sufficient to meet operational and maintenance costs, without any public subsidy to control prices. It is part and parcel of neoliberal measures that reject public subsidies of services in favour of forcing municipalities to recover the full costs for the delivery of basic services, from residents.

Decommodification

Refers to activities and efforts - generally carried out by the public sector/government - that remove goods, services etc. from the capitalist market and thus makes access to and affordability of, those goods and services much less dependent on the ability to pay.

Financialisation

A process whereby capitalist financial markets (e.g. stock exchanges), financial institutions (e.g. banks) and financial elites gain greater influence over economic policy and economic outcomes at both domestic and international levels, resulting in money being allocated away from real investment to financial speculation and a rise in debt driven consumption.

Nationalisation

The act or process by which privately-owned assets and/or enterprises are transferred to the ownership of a national government/state. It also refers to the transfer of assets and/or enterprises from municipal and local governments to a central/national government.

Neoliberal(ism)

A specific form of capitalist ideology and practice which has, over the last 40 years, become the dominant frame for development globally. The core ideas (translated into policy/practice) are: that the capitalist market possesses a 'natural efficiency'; that all goods and services should have a direct relationship to capital/money; that competition is good and at the heart of all human relations; that government intervention in and/or regulation of, the economy is distorting and inefficient; and, that when capitalist 'free markets' fail they can be easily corrected, with minimal socio-economic costs.

Participatory democracy

A model of democracy in which there is a broad participation of people in politics and where people have the power to directly shape and make decisions that affect their lives and society.

Privatisation

The act or process by which assets/property (e.g. land), enterprises (e.g. ESKOM) and services (e.g. water) and financing (public funds) that are owned/run/financed by the state or by other social/public entities, are transferred to the ownership or management/financing of the private sector. Additionally, there is partial privatisation whereby the state finances the provision of services either by purchasing the services from private vendors (outsourcing/contracting out), or by providing vouchers to individuals, agencies, or corporations to purchase the services.

Representative democracy

A form of governance, at whatever level, in which people elect others - either as individuals, political parties, movements - to represent them (e.g. in Parliament, as President, as party/organisational leader etc.).

Statism

Taken from the word 'state' which refers to a country's centralised executive or institutional authority which oversees and manages the administration of laws, national budgets, the provision of services, the justice and penal system as well as the police and military forces. As such 'statism' describes thinking and practice where such a state is seen and treated as the main goal or prize of political contestation and struggle and which gathers increasing levels and varieties of power into its hands on behalf of 'the people'.

WHY THIS BOOKLET?

The bottom line is that 'the water question concentrates and reflects within itself all the elements of exploitation, oppression and discrimination' that characterise our societies. It is no exaggeration to say that 'the quality and condition of our whole society' (whether national or international) 'depends on water'.

As this booklet will confirm, the realities of the water crises have been and continue to be, driven by a neoliberal approach which is framed by multiple forms of water privatisation. Indeed, the lived realities of the majority – urban and rural workers, small-scale farmers, unemployed women and youth, city slum dwellers and mining communities - are about marginalisation, disrespect, dispossession, conflict and violence, but also resistance.



The end-result in South Africa and across the African continent are that poor/working class urban and rural communities suffer the most direct consequences, while also being the most direct 'engagers' with and resisters to, these multiple crises. This is the case whether it relates to a lack of service delivery, failing infrastructure, limited access and affordability due to water meters and 'water management devices', pollution of water sources and/or the ever-rising price of water.

It is the combined 'stories' that speak to these realities which make up this popular education booklet. In other words, the history of water privatisation, the struggles waged against it and the possibilities for alternatives and

change. We all need to be fully aware of and knowledgeable about these histories, so that our ongoing struggles to decommodify water and ensure it becomes a public good which is delivered and managed equally and sustainably, are informed, strengthened and can become more unified.

THE KEY MESSAGES IN THIS BOOKLET ARE:

- At all levels of life - political, social, economic and cultural - the privatisation of water in whatever form, is anti-democratic, anti-social and anti-human.
- Water is part of a global commons, a natural resource that should never be seen and treated as a commodity only to be fully enjoyed by those who have money.
- Water is a public good fundamental for all life and health, and equal and sustainable access to it is indispensable for leading a life of human dignity.
- Resistance to the ideas and practice of water privatisation is both right and necessary but also needs to embrace and advocate for, practical alternatives at whatever level is possible.

THE REALITIES OF OUR LOCAL, NATIONAL AND GLOBAL WATER CRISES

According to the United Nations World Water Development Report, which was issued in early 2023, there are around 2 billion people (25% of the world's population) who do not have access to clean/safe drinking water, while 46% lack adequate sanitation services. It is predicted that within the next 2 years, almost 70% of the world's population will experience shortages of clean water.

For our continent the situation is even worse. Just under 50% of the population of sub-Saharan African have no access to safe drinking water, while 35% have no access to any basic drinking water services.

When it comes to South Africa, there was substantial progress in the first two decades after 1994 which saw the percentage of households with (formal) access to clean water increasing from 67% to an estimated 96% in 2018. However, at the same time and especially in the last several years, the reliability of water services and infrastructure as well as the state of water governance and infrastructural maintenance has been deteriorating rapidly.

So much so that by 2018 the percentage of households with (actual) reliable and safe water supply services decreased by 64%. Additionally, over 26% of all schools (urban or rural), and 45% of clinics have no access to water access.

But there is more to these crises. Water access and affordability issues are closely related to a range of community issues around the provision of basic services, food, health, housing, land as well as gender based violence. Further, water is at the heart of larger crises such as the climate crisis and armed conflict. At the heart of these multi-sided crises is the ideology and practice of capitalist neoliberalism.

THEY WANT TO TURN WATER INTO GOLD

The golden rule of the world in which we live is ... those who have the gold, rule.



Medieval scientists sought to turn base metals into gold, creating wealth for themselves and their rulers. Likewise modern science, harnessed by capitalists, seeks to turn water into gold.
– The Alchemy of Water, by Krystal Kyer, 2002

You have probably heard it being said before but our present day reality – whether in South Africa, on our continent or across the world – is that water is fast becoming the new 'gold'.

Those responsible for this are a small minority of greedy and self-interested political elites and multi-national corporations. Over the last 30-40 years they have driven an agenda, informed by a neoliberal ideology that seeks to turn our most natural

resource – water – into a commodified resource which, just like gold, can be bought and sold on a market that ordinary people have no say in or control over.

It is all about money, mostly making more of it. But it is also about making us all believe that water (or whatever other good or service we need to survive and live a decent life) only has meaning and value if it has a direct relationship to money.

In order for that to become a reality, there is the need to push for the privatisation (which can come in many different forms as we will discuss later) of water. This is exactly what has been happening over the last several decades in South Africa as well as across our continent and world.

This privatisation agenda was underpinned by the 'principle' that everyone (even the poor) must pay for good quality/clean (i.e. treated) water. In other words, it is impossible for such water to be free and thus readily accessible to everyone. The multinational water corporations that spread out across the African continent from the 1980s, publicly stated that unless the World Bank or national states financed their infrastructural costs, they would leave since most Africans were too poor to pay the water prices they charged.

What this all practically meant was that as privatisation took hold so too was a 'crisis of scarcity' created, helped along by bad state management/governance and the increasing impacts of climate change.

Such a crisis of scarcity fits hand-in-glove with the interests of the elitist minority. This was the case precisely because scarcity (of all basic goods and services and inclusive of workers' labour) is the basis of modern capitalism. And, it is exactly the same journey travelled by gold, wherein its commodified and private ownership and control creates the very scarcity that drives its economic value in the capitalist market.

Think of it another way. It is much easier for people to accept paying (increasing amounts of money) for water when they are being constantly told that not doing so will result in there being much less drinkable/usable water available. Such is the twisted logic of water privatisation.

MEANINGS AND FORMS OF PRIVATISATION

The importance of understanding the meaning of privatisation and its forms is critical. States often deny that they are undertaking privatisation simply because they are not selling the assets of state/public enterprises. However, privatisation can be defined more broadly to encompass a range of forms of private sector involvement in the provision of basic services and needs such as water.

There are two main models of privatisation:

The British model - the British model essentially involves the outright sale of public assets to a private company;

The French model - this takes a variety of forms of private sector participation, not necessarily involving the sale of assets. These include public-private partnerships, management contracts, leases, sub-contracting, management or employee buyout, outsourcing or contracting specific activities to private actors as well as the wholesale corporatisation of the public entity.

Corporatisation/commercialisation are concepts and practices that are embedded within privatisation and incorporate many principles inherent in privatisation, such as performance-based management and full-cost recovery. A corporatised or commercialised entity is state owned but operates on a commercial basis as a private company – (or as a ‘quasi’ private body).

The most popular form of privatisation in South Africa and Africa is one form or another of a private-public partnership (PPP), operating within a framework of generally accepted commercial principles fundamentally different from those that traditionally drove public sector service delivery. The expectation is that service provision should be run ‘like a business’. The consequence is growing corporatisation of delivery modes and the commodification of services.



THE INHERITANCES OF COLONIAL-APARTHEID 'DEVELOPMENT'

At the core of colonial-apartheid 'development' was the racialised dispossession and control of natural resources, the most crucial of which were land and water. As the colonial presence spread out across the African continent so too did the direct assault on Africa's water commons in which there was no conception let alone practice of (individual and/or special group) water ownership and use outside of the needs of 'society'.

By the 19th century the widespread development and reach of capitalist social and economic relations across the African continent had fundamentally changed the entire terrain and relationship of people/communities and water.

In South Africa, a host of laws and regulations gave both the colonial-apartheid state and white private property owners (inclusive of large business/corporations) absolute ownership and control of all water resources. This was the case whether as applied to water access and provision to urban and rural individual households and communities or to the commercial agricultural and mining industries.

By the time the formal policy of racialised separate development had taken hold in the mid-20th century, even those areas deemed as 'black' were denied state resources and subsidies as a central part of this 'development' strategy. As a result, from the 1970s onwards, both the black 'homelands' and urban townships received much lower standards of infrastructural and service related provision.

In an effort to recover costs, officials in many urban townships (known as 'Black Local Authorities') began to charge residents higher rates than was being charged in white areas for services such as water and electricity. This was an example of what can be called neoliberal apartheid, which was not specific to South Africa but which was rolled out in most colonies across Sub-Saharan Africa.

From the late 1980s and into the early 1990s, the response from urban township residents across South Africa was to engage in widespread rate and rent boycotts. This forced most 'Black Local Authorities' to subsidise prices by charging one low flat rate for all services, including water.

These boycotts became a key part of the more general/popular mobilisation in opposition to the increased political oppression of the apartheid state. Besides ensuring that payment rates as well as disconnections of, services such as water remained low until the advent of democracy in 1994, the demand for all basic services to be provided 'free' became an integral part of the overall liberation struggle.



PHOTOGRAPH: DALE MCKINLEY

Democracy of a Special (Neoliberal) Type

In 1994, when the African National Congress (ANC) came to power in South Africa's first democratic elections, there were high expectations amongst many that it would honour the popular demands for free basic services and pursue more progressive, pro-poor and redistributive development policies. But, that is not what happened.

The apartheid state had begun introducing several policy 'reforms' of a neoliberal nature in the 1980s in response to more radical people's resistance and its own economic crisis. Instead of actively opposing these, the ANC agreed to the signing of a large state loan from the neoliberal International Monetary Fund (IMF).

It also soon signed the country up as a full member of both the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS), both loud champions of neoliberalism. What this meant was the acceptance of the commodification of basic services. Indeed, just after the completion of the 1994 elections, the new government launched the 'Masakhane' ('Let's build together') publicity campaign, which encouraged township residents to pay their service bills.

Sure enough, less than 2 years into the new, democratic South Africa (1996), the ANC state announced (without any democratic consultation) the adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR) macro-economic plan. This set the country clearly onto a neoliberal development path. GEAR stated that any commitments related to the content and character of basic service



delivery, would be subject to neoliberal 'considerations' of budget restraint, labour flexibility, privatisation and cuts in social spending, amongst others.

The main aim of these workshops, attended by hundreds of delegates from various governments and the private sector, was to 'develop consensus on national and regional policies and programmes' using a World Bank paper which presented all the key neoliberal arguments around privatised water management and delivery as necessary 'policy reforms' to 'create a conducive climate for investment'. In March 2000, the Bank's Orwellian-inspired Sourcebook on Community Driven Development in the Africa Region laid out the policy on pricing water: 'Work is still needed with political leaders in some national governments to move away from the concept of free water for all.'

The presence and activity of multinational water corporations intensified across the continent, with South Africa now becoming a key target. The France-based, Suez Lyonnaise and the British-based BiWater (amongst others) soon signed service contracts in several smaller provincial towns, culminating in Suez's securing what was then Africa's largest contract, servicing over 600 000 households, with the City of Johannesburg.

Not surprisingly, the period from the late 1900s into the mid-2000s saw the real 'equitable share' of national revenue and grants that should have been provided to local government being consistently slashed. This ensured that local government was forced to rely almost wholly on self-generated revenue to fund the delivery of a range of basic services, inclusive of water, creating a situation where more and more local government entities had to:

- cut back drastically on service delivery targets, with the poor being the hardest hit;
- prioritise 'cost recovery' in order to gain revenue, resulting in cut-offs, the implementation of pre-paid water meters and contributing to serious social and environmental decay;
- privatise/corporatise the management and delivery of basic services leading to rising prices, prioritisation of those able to pay and the creation of an enabling environment for patronage, corruption and factional politics.

The neoliberal onslaught also incentivised growing corruption in the water sector. Secretive and often hugely inflated contracts/tenders signed between government/public entities (at various levels) and private/corporate businesses soon became the order of the day.

For example, in the years that followed: multi-year contracts were signed at municipal level with multinational corporates that built-in massive public subsidies to ensure profit-making; taps in rural villages ran dry because local politicians and their friends could get contracts to truck-in water; and, a major dam construction project in the Lesotho Highlands (to supply more water to the Gauteng Province) has remained delayed due a National Minister trying to change procurement rules for the benefit of connected friends.

Indeed, a key part of the neoliberal 'culture' was the normalisation of corruption. Companies paid bribes to get contracts as part of their 'normal' business practice. Other companies, in collusion with government officials who got kick-backs, pushed unnecessary projects, massively over-charged, and, claimed payment for shoddy or non-existent work. Within the public sector/state, jobs were handed out like sweets to unqualified but politically connected people and lower-level officials were consistently pressurised, at the risk of dismissal, by politicians and seniors to sign-off or turn a blind eye to the corrupt deals and practices.



PHOTOGRAPH: WATERCAN, 2023

PRIVATISATION MYTHS

Better and cheaper services

Large corporations always approach states with promises to provide better and cheaper services. However, this is not true in practice. In most cases companies take over the provision of basic services but do not assume the risk of making losses. The state is often made to act as a guarantor of a company's profits and might need to pay large sums for the company's unrealised profits or its debts.

Accountability

The arguments here are that the public sector is inherently corrupt and unaccountable whereas the private sector providers and independent regulation and monitoring are more accountable against a transparent set of rules, in a system without conflicts of interest. The South African and international experience shows this is not necessarily so. In fact private firms tend to be less accountable, and processes of contracting out and privatisation tend to reduce public accountability. Corruption is hardly unique to the public sector and governmental capacity for regulation is steadily being eroded anyway, so enforcing accountability is increasingly difficult.

Transparency

The contracts with private actors are often concluded in secrecy and it is difficult for the public to have access to these contracts. As a result, it is very difficult for the public to know what the contractual terms are and thus to know if the contractor is abiding by or breaking the terms of the contract. Further, monitoring private service delivery is very difficult because the private actor keeps all the statistics and information about service delivery and it is therefore difficult and expensive for the state to verify independently what the company is providing.

Efficiency

Another claim is that competition and the profit motive create efficiencies that translate into lower service costs, wider accessibility and savings that can be directed to extending or upgrading services as well as providing targeted subsidies for the poor and even environmental investments. Once again, the South African and international experience does not support these claims. The private sector is not necessarily more efficient than the public sector and important costs of privatisation are hidden. These costs often relate to violations of health and environmental regulations. The costs most often outweigh any savings made by privatising in the first place. Privatised service delivery is only concerned about their bottom-line – profit.

Foreign direct investment

Another one of the main arguments for privatising services is that foreign direct investment in water services will occur. However, the historic experience in Africa is that the state and/or public sector financial institutions, end up directly subsidising or extending favourable loans to the private concession in order to maintain the profit margins and thus keep the project afloat.

THE IMPACTS ON THE POOR AND WORKING CLASS

The human dignity of entire communities has been ripped apart, as the right to the most basic of human needs, water, has been turned into a restricted privilege available only to those who can afford it.

– From the founding Declaration of the Coalition Against Water Privatisation

In the two-and-a-half decades since 1994, the combined impacts of the privatisation of water in South Africa (and also across the African continent) have been tragic and devastating for the majority poor and working class who also are the most socially and economically vulnerable and marginalised.

Some of those impacts can be measured, others are 'hidden' in everyday sacrifices, health problems, financial squeezes and practical challenges. The constructed scarcity, racial and class discrimination, introduction of pre-paid meters/'water management devices', lack of infrastructural maintenance and individualist/consumerist, profit at any cost approach combined to create multi-sided crises.

Divisive social relations

While in the past neighbours readily shared water, many were forced to either buy or steal it from each other. Occasions, such as weddings and funerals became more stressful for households and communities as affordability took centre stage. Divisions in communities surfaced over differential



PHOTOGRAPH: WATERCAN, 2023

access to water. Individual and family relations became more conflictual over decisions of how limited finances were to be spent and the scarcity of water for food production (especially for small-scale/survivalist farmers in the rural areas) served to increase social stress.

Sickness/diseases

Parents, friends and neighbours became increasingly powerless to provide for the needs of the sick, in particular for those living with HIV-AIDS, and later with COVID-19. Women faced increased pressures as the dominant caregivers, shouldering the responsibility of doing without water or finding alternative sources for it. Epidemics of cholera - in South and Sub-Saharan Africa - broke out when residents who could not afford to pay the full cost of drinking water were forced to find water in streams, ponds

and lakes polluted with manure and human waste. Hundreds of thousands were infected and thousands died. Further, inadequate hygiene and 'self-serve' sanitation systems led to continuous exposure (especially for children) to various preventable diseases. There was also an increase in environmental pollution and degradation arising from uncontrolled effluent discharges.

Cut-offs

By the early 2000s there were close to 100 000 people in Johannesburg alone who were experiencing water and electricity cut-offs every month. At a national level, the figures for the first decade after 1994 indicate that over 10 million people experienced water cut-offs as a result of their inability to pay the ever-rising water costs. Even more devastating, during that same decade around 2 million were evicted from their homes because they could not afford the service bills. In the last decade and a half, the cut-offs have taken place more by stealth – through pre-paid meters, water management devices and water flow restrictors. These have individualised an alienated and commodified relationship between people and water, which is at the heart of the neoliberal abandonment of public/social responsibility and the destruction of the collective/commons to water.



Rising prices

The systematic shift to full cost-recovery pricing frameworks saw water prices increase dramatically. From 1996 – 2020, the average household water bill increased by just under 300%. However, for poorer households in small towns and rural areas, the unit (per kilolitre) cost rose by as much as 500% over the same period. What made this all the worse was that these price rises occurred at the same time that the poor and working class were being hit hard by job losses, falling incomes and price rises on most basic foodstuffs and core needs such as transport.

Job losses and casualisation

Privatisation (in whatever form) always results in job losses as well as job casualisation when the 'restructuring' and 'downsizing' of public entities/enterprises takes place to prepare for private management/control and profit making. In South Africa, from the late 1990s and early-mid 2000s, thousands of municipal workers lost their jobs and the jobs of many thousands more workers were shifted from permanent to casual/contract. Besides having a hugely negative socio-economic impact in poor/working class communities where public sector employment was/is the largest source of formal employment, the jobs and the working conditions of the remaining water workers were made more vulnerable and precarious.

Weakening of democracy

The push for water privatisation that occurred during the late 1990s and 2000s, greatly contributed to a massive growth in infrastructural backlogs and service-delivery failures as well as new opportunities for tenderpreneurs. This opened the door to self-serving political meddling and the commercialisation of politics, which was particularly felt at the local government level. What this did was to further entrench a culture of patronage, corruption and mal-governance wherein formal systems of representation and accountability were rendered ineffective and inaccessible to most citizens.



PHOTOGRAPHS: DALE MCKINLEY

PEOPLE'S RESISTANCE

'No Money, No Water, No life'

– Words on poster at anti-privatisation protest in Johannesburg, 2002

It did not take long for the poor and working class to start fighting back against the rising tide of water privatisation. Tapping into the deep well of apartheid-era community, labour, youth/student and women's activism and struggle, new organisations and movements rose up to defend public services/goods and take on the corporate profiteers and political elites.

In Johannesburg, a range of different worker, community and student organisations came together to form the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF). 'Operation Vulamanzi' ('Water for all') was quickly launched to oppose the forced installation of pre-paid meters and other 'water management devices' (such as trickler systems) through reappropriation techniques of by-passing that struck a grassroots blow for the immediate 'decommodification' of water and self-empowerment of the community. Simultaneously, an ultimately successful campaign began to oppose the renewal of the 5-year contract between Johannesburg Water and the multinational corporate Suez Lyonnaise.

The birth of the APF was also accompanied by the launching of several other new social and community-based movements across South Africa, most of whom joined the struggle against water privatisation. Examples included: APF's in the Eastern and Western Cape, the Landless People's



PHOTOGRAPH: DALE MCKINLEY

Movement (national), the Anti-Eviction Campaign (Western Cape), Jubilee (national) and Abahlali base Mjondolo (Shack Dwellers Movement based in Kwa-Zulu Natal). In addition, the majority of the rank and file members of the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) actively supported and participated in anti-privatisation struggles.

These and other movements then came together to form the Social Movements Indaba (Indaba meaning 'discussion' or 'meeting') which organised a mass anti-capitalist and internationalist march in 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development and for several years afterwards coordinated a variety of anti-privatisation educational activities and direct actions.

By late 2003, the gathering pace of specific struggles around water were given a boost with the formation of the Coalition Against Water Privatisation (CAWP). This brought together community organisations, progressive NGOs/academics and unions to forge a broad united front in the struggle against water privatisation. For the next several years, CAWP was at the forefront of: fighting the 'water wars' that erupted in the communities of Orange Farm and Phiri against pre-paid meters; conducting participatory research to counter the lies and myths of the water privatisers; and, engaging in a range of tactics, including pickets/marches, door-to-door mobilising and legal challenges.

Importantly, CAWP also initiated the formation of the African Water Network in the late 2000s. This allowed activists from several countries to share information, learn from each other's struggles as well as to participate in numerous regional and international social fora and meetings with allied movements and progressive NGOs.

Unfortunately, by the second decade of the 2000s the APF, CAWP and most of the larger social movements that had been active from the late 1990s had wound up/ceased to exist due a range of largely internal organisational, ideological and resource-related challenges. Despite these negative developments, the impacts of combined struggles over the previous 15 years or so had ensured the effective defeat of larger-scale water privatisation involving multinational corporates and a rapid decline in the widespread rollout of pre-paid meters.

While this was a definite victory at one level, at another level it did not change the reality of ever-declining allocations of funds from the national to local level of government. Besides the building and maintenance of basic water infrastructure and services, these funds were/are supposed to support the provision of a free (but wholly inadequate 6 kilolitres per household) monthly basic amount of water to poor households. Not surprisingly, the gap between what was on paper/being promised and what was actually delivered became wider and wider.

All of this opened up more space and opportunity for an intensified shift to the corporatisation/commercialisation of local, metropolitan and regional public water entities as 'full cost recovery' again



took centre stage. In tandem, it also turbo-charged the roll out of water management devices (WMDs – which cut water supply off after the free basic amount has been used up) and flow restrictors which only allow the free basic amount to trickle out of the tap over the entire month.

Although found in many parts of the country, more especially in larger urban/metropolitan areas, the struggle against the WMD and restrictors has been especially intense and sustained in/around the City of Cape Town since they were first introduced in 2007. Mostly installed in poor communities, the devices have greatly contributed to residents' health

problems coming from exposure to toxic wastewater and a lack of clean water for drinking, hygiene and washing. And, as had happened time and again where profit/cost-recovery is central, the poor continue to lose everything when denied adequate water. The most tragic example being during one week in October 2018 when 3 people died and over 6000 families lost their homes from fires, most of which could have been contained had there been enough water.

Widespread opposition and anger led to the formation of the African Water Commons Collective (AWCC) which, over the last several years has conducted extensive research and education as well as been able to assist, organise and mobilise many poor communities to get the City to abandon the devices. Those efforts paid off when the City announced in mid-2021 that the devices would be replaced by conventional meters. However, as the AWCC has noted, there remain serious problems including who qualifies for 'indigent benefits' and the reintroduction of the devices if those 'indigents' exceed their allocated monthly water usage.

In South Africa there has been 25 years of unbroken if highly varied in form and intensity, struggles emanating from progressive social movements, community organisations, unions/worker formations, NGOs and individual activists. While the battle against water privatisation has certainly not been won outright, there have been numerous victories and advances. As in other parts of the continent, these will need to be sustained with renewed energy, creative tactics, collective unity and an undying belief in the possibilities of radical change and alternatives.

A HISTORY OF STRUGGLE AND FAILED PRIVATISATIONS ON THE CONTINENT



PHOTOGRAPH: CAPPA

No matter where you are from on this continent, the threat of water privatisation is real. Corporations and institutions like the World Bank are trying to suck water and profits out of Africa as though they have a massive drinking straw. But Africans say no—our water, our right. We do not need international financial institutions or corporations to take care of our people.

– Akinbode Oluwafemi (Corporate Accountability & Public Participation Africa)

The struggle against water privatisation on the African continent has been going on for decades in various forms. As the World Bank and IMF, working hand-in-glove with multinational corporations and core capitalist countries, began to force neoliberal 'Structural Adjustment Programmes' (SAPs) onto many African countries from the early 1980s onwards, so too did a range of counter-struggles emerge.

Most of these were initially part of larger currents of political and ideological opposition to SAPs which aimed the neoliberal dagger straight at the heart of a wide array of public assets and services. A key weapon of SAPs was privatisation, whether involving outright change of ownership or more 'indirect' corporatisation/commercialisation. However, starting in the mid-late 1990s there was a huge expansion in the activities of British and French water corporates, who specifically targeted their former African colonies.

Those activities began to pay off in the early-mid 2000s when public water utilities and/or services were privatised in several African countries and larger cities. Even though the privatisation projects were most often named as 'public-private partnerships' to try and fend off controversies and critical questions around issues of national sovereignty and neo-colonialism, there emerged substantial popular opposition.

Many of the counter-struggles took place, and continue to take place, on a more local and national level. However, emanating initially out of the more organised anti-privatisation movements in South Africa as well as the regular gatherings of activists at World Social Forums and counter/alternative Water Forum gatherings, an African Water Network was formed in 2007 and 15 years later the African Water Justice Network followed.

These continental efforts have not only created more opportunities for unified approaches and struggle in specific respect of water privatisation, they are linking the water question to broader challenges around climate change, migration and conflict.

While the push to privatise water on the continent continues despite repeated failures, there is no doubt that a combination of popular anger, anti-privatisation struggles, a clear lack of access and affordability as well as corruption and secrecy in privatisation deals have made significant contributions to reversing the tide. Below are a few brief case studies that speak to these historical and present-day realities.

Tanzania

After years of negotiations starting in the late 1990s with heavy pressure from the World Bank and IMF related to repaying debt, the water system of the capital, Dar es Salaam, was privatised in a deal with a consortium led by the British water corporate, BiWater. Widespread public opposition was ignored and there was no meaningful public participation or consultation and no transparency around the privatisation process. Within two years the project had ended. The consortium had performed so badly that not only were fewer people receiving water, prices skyrocketed, water quality declined and no new infrastructure was built. However, this did not end Dar es Salaam's water woes given the past and ongoing mismanagement of and corruption in, the public water utility and the failure to address vast inequalities in access and affordability.

Gabon

Water privatisation in Gabon provides another classic example of how neoliberal institutions like the World Bank (WB) drive and benefit from privatisation of public services. Not only did the WB finance arm (the 'International Finance Corporation') largely structure and implement the privatisation deal in Gabon in the late 1990s, it oversaw the procurement process, resulting in French water multinational Veolia taking control of the national utility. It then proceeded to widely tout the Gabonese

privatisation as a huge success despite significant public opposition and a mountain of evidence to the contrary. Besides widespread supply cuts, bill irregularities and environmental hazards, there was an outbreak of typhoid in the capital and other parts of the country following long periods of water service disruption. The end result was a cancellation of the 20 year contract in 2018, but not before the Gabonese state was forced to pay Veolia €45 million (almost R1 billion) by the World Bank's tribunal.

Ghana

Like in so many other African countries, Ghana was subject to years of pressure by the World Bank and IMF - under the guise of the need for 'fiscal discipline' and 'private sector participation' - to privatise its public water utility. That pressure paid off in the mid-2000s when a contract was awarded to Aqua Vitens Rand Limited (AVRL - a joint venture of Dutch multinational Vitens Evides International and South Africa's Rand Water). This was despite widespread and intense resistance from labour and other civil society organisations under the banner of the 'National Coalition Against the Privatisation of Water'. Over the next few years, AVRL failed to deliver on any of its promised targets of water accessibility and affordability, while trying to enforce the installation of pre-paid meters on Ghana's poor and working class. Through consistent mobilisation and campaigning, the Water Citizens Network succeeded in getting the state to cancel the contract in 2011 but the struggle continues around pre-paid meters and a new privatisation contract awarded to BiWater in Ghana's Northern Region.

Kenya

The threat of water privatisation has been confronting many communities across Kenya for decades. Once again, it is the World Bank which has been at the forefront spending huge funds to promote and create a regulatory environment amenable to privatisation through the establishment of 'Public-Private Partnerships' (PPPs). As a result the Kenyan state has more recently listed water and sanitation as priority sectors for PPPs and is presently forging ahead with plans for PPPs related to 'water



PHOTOGRAPH: DALE MCKINLEY

supply, treatment and distribution systems' in Nairobi and other counties across the country. Both in the past and present, various Kenyan CSOs as along with workers unions have employed multiple tactics in opposition and making common cause amongst and between residents of Kenya's arid and more water-rich counties. The latest example in mid-2023 involved over 3000 Nairobi City County Water and Sewerage Services workers staging a protest against the city's PPP bill.

Nigeria

Nigeria has for a long time been a prime target of the World Bank and water corporates given the size of its population and economy. Starting from the 1980s, there have been numerous privatisation projects pushed, under the cover of 'developmental financing' and 'institutional reforms'. The Nigerian political and economic elites have largely gone along with the privatisation agenda, and more specifically PPPs as a means to rationalise and cover up the realities of the state's service delivery failures. The pro-privatisation National Action Plan for the water sector and a recently approved US\$700 million (R1.3 billion) World Bank loan provide confirmation. Not surprisingly, there has been strong resistance across the country, largely under the banner of the Our Water, Our Right coalition, formed in 2014 out of initial opposition movements in Lagos. While the coalition has succeeded in halting some of the privatisation plans through varied and creative tactics, the World Bank-Nigerian elite crew continues to try and undermine public services and popular will.

ALTERNATIVES AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF CHANGE

Our perspective is that of the planet's commoners: human beings with bodies, needs, desires, whose most essential tradition is of cooperation in the making and maintenance of life.

– The Emergency Exit Collective, Bristol, May Day 2008

At the foundational base of every struggle against water privatisation, there should be a fundamental set of principles and values (with thanks to ex-Bolivian Water Minister Abel Mamani) that reads something like this:

- Water belongs to the earth and all living beings including human beings – our water commons - and it is our human duty to nurture and protect it
- Water is a core human right and access to and enjoyment of it is linked to the realisation of other human rights
- Water is a global, public good and cannot belong to or be owned by any one nation, state, business or individual





- Water management and distribution needs to be in a sphere that is public, social, community-based, participative and not based on profit
- Water should never be privatised and should be withdrawn from all 'free market' trade and investment agreements

This set of principles and values is grounded in the life and struggle experiences of the majority of people in our world over the last half century in particular, whether they are from South Africa, the African continent or anywhere else across the globe.

At the heart of those experiences are two central realities: the downfalls and failures of the statist model of revolutionary change that have undermined popular, radical efforts to build alternatives to capitalism; and, the increasing realisation, thanks to neoliberalism, that humans cannot 'subordinate every form of life and knowledge to the logic of the market' and every relationship to the money system.

When we combine the principles/values and the experiences, both the objective and subjective necessity for alternatives to water privatisation becomes crystal clear. So what might be the building blocks of those alternatives? Below are a set of ideas and actions (in no specific order of importance) that are grounded in those principles/values and experiences. Hopefully, they will assist movements, organisations, campaigns and activists in the ongoing struggle not only to stop water privatisation in whatever form but to lay the foundations for concrete and lasting change.



PHOTOGRAPH: DALE MCKINLEY

Democratic struggles and political-organising processes

- Bottom-up as opposed to top-down methods of organising and struggle, with direct participation of all in decision-making
- Public-public unity/partnerships of the public sector, social movements, community organisations, trade unions, as well as progressive NGOs and politicians/activists
- Concrete international solidarity such as practical joint campaigns that globalise the anti-privatisation struggle/message, target water multinationals as well as political elites/co-opted governments, integrate worker rights issues and struggles and bring global weight into national and local struggles.

Popular participation/building broad coalitions and multiple tactics

- Identify and bring together existing knowledge and capacity resources
- Forge cross-class, cross-institutional, cross-sectional connections and alliances with as many progressive forces and activists as possible;
- Build inclusive, broad coalitions using a staged approach that begins with more mainstream campaigns (for example, rights claims) and then moves on to more radical demands once the legitimacy and presence of the coalition is established.
- Use multiple tactics that speak to and involve different constituencies; for example, strategic litigation, direct action/protest, self and community repair/supply of infrastructure, participatory research and local water action committees

Preferred forms of water governance-management-delivery

- Non-state organisations that operate independently of the state on a not-for-profit basis and are oriented to principles of equality and social citizenship
- Public-Public Partnerships in which two or more public and/or non-profit entities work together to manage and deliver water services.

Public sector finance

- Map out existing models for public finance, define what a progressive financing agenda looks like and then expand awareness on alternative means to finance public-public water governance-management and delivery
- Forge key alliances with water activists, progressive CSOs, public sector managers, academics and progressive policy makers
- Popularise and advocate for these alternatives, through popular coalitions and campaigns at global, national and local levels

Key factors to inform new water governance-management-delivery approaches and practice

- Inclusivity, transparency (e.g., information sharing) and openness to regular lines of popular accountability where the public is at the centre
- A macro-model of sustainability, covering natural, financial and human resources framed by equity and justice
- Changes in institutional culture, mindsets/consciousness that embrace the role of public service, custodianship and conservation.

Our key challenge is clear: to combine movement and coalition building, practical struggle and concrete engagement to improve existing or create new public and communal forms and ways of governance, management and delivery. In doing so, we will not only be tending the existing 'gardens' of the water commons but will be planting new seeds of alternatives and change.

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ILRIG is a support organisation dedicated to research, education, training, the production of popular materials and the provision of reflective spaces for working class movements and activists in South and Southern Africa.



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