

What is our role in the World Water Crisis?

Discussion following excerpts from:

Water For All? Commodity Versus Human Right:

The Opposing Approaches to the World Water Crisis

(Adler, Simone. Independent Study, Field Work Term 2011.)

What approaches are being taken to confront the water crisis?

The two main approaches are either: *market-based commodity approach*, usually involving corporations and some scheme of privatization, sometimes with the pressure of an international bank; and the *public service, human-right approach* that attempts to involve communities into the decision-making and implementation process of government-funded water management. (Adler 3)

What is the context of the debate?

The right to water is a historically complex issue. Who has the right to own water, and how much? Who has the right to pollute water that will flow downstream to some unlucky riparian recipient? Who has the right to divert and control water? Who has the right to claim a flowing, moving source? These questions are not new to water policy and have created much tension within both nations and communities as well as internationally.

Traditionally, water has been treated as a natural right, arising out of riparian societies that saw water as a common property. History shows that the right to water is fundamentally understood in the context of human existence. The creation of statehood did not create the notion of water as a right; it has always been so. "As natural rights, water rights are

usufructuary rights; water can be used but not owned. People have a right to life and the resources that sustain it, such as water."¹ That natural right is put into question with the approach to water as another commodity to be bought and sold on the market. (Adler 13)

What is implied by the commodification of water? Viewing water strictly as a commodity in the global North has been equated with the water bottling industry, the water technology industry, and the management and wastewater treatment industry. In other words, this has meant privatizing water sources for a consumer society, which requires a manufactured demand or supply-and-demand model based on bottom-line profit. It also means that there are necessary steps to take in order to ensure that his water is clean and safe to drink (removing any pollutants and chemicals). This is where the private sector has taken control, anticipating large profits. "The more private interests control water supplies, the less government and public interests have to say about them. The commodification of water is the commodification of nature."² (Adler 18-19).

¹ Shiva, Vandana. *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit*. Cambridge: South End, 2002. (p.21)

² Barlow, Maude. *Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water*. New York: New Press, 2007. (p.38)

Water is unique. It cannot be manufactured or genetically engineered; it simply recycles through the hydrological cycle. As de Villiers rightly asserts, "All life depends on water; indeed, life probably began in water. Water's curious heat-retaining properties steady the climate and make life on our planet sustainable. Without clean water, disease and misery take their toll. Without water we die."³ (Adler 20).

How does bottled water affect the water crisis?

There are four companies dominating the bottled water industry: Nestlé, a Swiss company with brands such as Vittel, Perrier, San Pellegrin, and Poland Springs; Danone, with the brands Evian and Volvic; PepsiCo, based in the US, uses the Aquafina brand but has other brands in different countries; and its rival, Coca-Cola, another famous American company which uses the brand Dasani in the US. Pepsi and Coke bottle up tap water after putting it through reverse osmosis and adding minerals...The bottled water trend is happening in the global South as well, however bottled water only serves the elite and those that can afford it...Moreover, the world water crisis is what brings in profit for the bottled water industry. "As the world's freshwater supply dwindles, the need to find new sources rises, creating a brand-new

³ De Villiers, Marq. *Water: The Fate of Our Most Precious Resource*. Boston: Mariner, 2001. (p.30)

market... [which] has created a brand-new investment opportunity, and suddenly water has become a hot property on the stock market...demand is never affected by inflation, recession, interest rates or changing tastes"⁴...The Pacific Institute's *Water and Sustainability Program* reports an estimate of \$100 billion per year of total consumer expenditures for bottled water. The bottled water industry is therefore a huge player in the global economy, influenced by global corporations, and outstripping other markets all together. The effects on the environment are certainly not negligent...Only about 23 percent of plastic bottles are recycled. (Adler 23-24)

What is the pro-market argument?

"The introduction of clearly defined and tradable water rights is not only conducive to greater efficiency, it also results in the water going where it does the most economic good, which in turns spells greater prosperity. Water that cannot be traded is pent up in the use that politicians have determined for it. Its yield is suboptimized and the whole country left so much the poorer...the market will see to it that the water is sold to more efficient growers, thereby enhancing the prosperity of the nation as a whole."⁵ Is the prosperity of a nation, or the GDP, a sufficient measurement for individual well-being? It is evident that poverty exists in countries with the highest GDPs. What Segerfeldt describes would simply measure the amount of revenue

that water usage brings in. His market argument is flawed insofar as he maintains that water should go to where it will "do the most good". Why will water do the most good in places where people can afford it? Wouldn't water do the most good in places where people need it most?

Against subsidized assets to be spent on water (which is far less than it should be in the developing world) supply and demand would measure the price level of water. However, this is a moot point because there is always a demand for water – it is a necessary part of life. (Adler 26-27)

What is the public-service approach?

Governments have a responsibility to uphold the right to water as a public service to their people. The provision of clean, safe drinking water and wastewater treatment is intrinsically linked to management systems. These systems should be in the public domain to ensure their quality and services. Involvement through local or regional government collaboration with committees creates oversight and public involvement, and puts stronger incentives into the government to provide to its people...If it were this simple, however, the world water crisis would certainly not be the complex issue that it is... It is no help that many countries in the global South in which a significant portion of the population does not have access to water and have poor sanitation, are also the countries with corrupt governments...that do not equitably distribute finances across the national economy... development aid or debt relief from the World Bank, IMF, and other international financial institutions is often contingent upon

privatizing water, pushing for less public involvement. (Adler 36)

Although it is true that governments all over the world have track records of incompetence and bureaucracy, a stronger decentralization and emphasis on local governance and accountability is a viable alternative, as well as the often-cited approach by anti-privatization activists on water communities. (Adler 37)

The future of the world water crisis is in the hands of everyone, not just governments and corporations. What it truly means to have water justice and democracy can only be understood with individual actions. Understanding that water justice and democracy means water for all, indiscriminately and equitably, leads to greater respect for this natural gift that sustains all life. "People have a right to life and the resources that sustain it, such as water" writes Shiva. (Adler 40)

Collaborative water management is essential to upholding water as a human right. (Adler 42).

On July 28th, 2009 the United Nations General Assembly declared water a human right.

Water Facts

(compiled from: Water.org, Water Advocates, H2O for Life, One Drop, and National Geographic.)

Nearly 1.1 billion people do not have access to water; 2.6 billion people lack even basic sanitary facilities.

Every year, 3.5 million people die of water-borne illness.

Lack of access to potable water kills more children than AIDS, malaria, and smallpox combined.

Women in developing countries walk an average of 3.7 miles to get water.

Poor people living in slums often pay 5-10 times more per liter of water than wealthy people living in the same city.

⁴ Barlow, Maude. (p.86)

⁵ Segerfeldt, Fredrik. *Water for Sale: How Business and the Market Can Resolve the World's Water Crisis*. Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 2005. (p.32).