

STOP WATER GRABBING – International Coordination Forum

concept note

The World Social Forum (WSF) of Tunis 2015 is held while a superposition of different crises is hitting its stride: economic crisis, social crisis, environmental crisis, pandemic crisis, food crisis, energy crisis, geopolitical crisis. Water, because of its many and competing uses, is the nexus at the centre of most of these crises.

The threats to the right to water

Millions of hectares of land have been granted by weak states at negligible prices to the benefit of foreign private exploitative companies, thus fostering agri-business and agri-exports. The result is that in many places, such as in Africa, the quantity of water needed to cultivate the land during the year 2009 is twice the volume used for agriculture in the entirety of the continent during the 4 previous years. This expropriation of natural resources, and of water in particular, violates the communities' right to directly manage of water in a free and autonomous way, and has a lasting impact on the sovereignty of States.

Reportedly, by 2030 70% of the world population will live in towns, of which more than half in “shanty towns”, where the lack of access to water, sanitation and energy, is not a fatality, but the largely predictable result of ineffective, expensive and dangerous policies deliberately adopted by governments who seem more responsive and accountable to their international donors – in exchange for interesting private benefits – then to their citizens' rights and well-being. Social movements and civil society organizations should not ignore the scenarios linked to the water and sanitation crisis, and their daily consequences on human life, health, means of subsistence and livelihoods, in sum on life as such.

At the same time, the new trade and investment policies that Europe is currently putting in place, with the United States on one hand (such as the TTIP, the transatlantic partnership for trade and investment), and with the the rest of the world on the other (the EPA, the economic partnership agreements, or the free exchange, between the EU and ACP countries), foreshadows a new world order where the role of politics, institutions, elected bodies and citizenship are marginalized. The treaty negotiations aiming to liberalize the public services are susceptible to introduce and increase the public-private partnership, as well as the privatisation of the management of drinking water in towns and at a rural level. Confronted with the lack of resources on site, the implementation of these treaties will result in the appropriation and the grabbing, to the benefit of Northern multinationals, of all the public services connected to water, including the provision, the sanitation, the distribution and the purification.

Yet, we are convinced that the rarefaction of water is not a natural given and inevitable, such as the propaganda of the green capitalism would like it: instead, it is socially constructed. The privatization and commercialization of the resources and services therefore represent flawed and

dangerous answers which must be fought at all costs, for the preservation of water as a public good, a human right, and a commons. The conflicts in Palestine, Mali, Ethiopia, Iraq or Sudan, where the struggles for the access to water play a considerable role, illustrate in a tragic way the ineptitude of the international community, who proved incapable, or unwilling, to fight in a concrete manner the desertification, and who never seriously upheld the international conventions existing to this purpose and recommended by the scientific community and the international civil society. It could have, to this day, saved millions of lives. Paradoxically, we observe that even where water is available, the populations still do not have access to drinking water, and sanitation remains a luxury for the majority amongst them.

The stages of mobilisation

Most of the promises and commitments taken on by the international community have remained in large part an annoying exercise of wishful thinking. At six months of distance from the deadline, we can conclude that the declaration of the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations has not been respected, and that in particular the promise to provide access to drinking water and sanitation, through the national policies and international aid and development, has not been fulfilled. After 10 years of mobilization, the movements for water of all the continents have obtained the recognition from the United Nation General Assembly of the human right to water and sanitation (resolution 64/292 of 2010): and yet we are far from witnessing the implementation of this right across the world. Today many countries, of which notably Northern countries who abstained themselves from the recognition of the human right to water, overtly oppose all explicit mention of water as a human right in the framework of the UN negotiation for a post-2015 agenda of sustainable development goals.

Take Action against Global Water Grabbing

In the last 30 years, COSPE (www.cospe.org) has been fighting to promote the free access to water for all as a human right and a commons, together with civil society networks from more than 40 countries around the world. Today, however, a new global phenomenon, both alarming and widespread, threatens the achievement of these goals: ***the water grabbing***. Water grabbing is everywhere, as it refers to the wide variety of phenomena characterized by the removal of water as a commons freely available to all, and the alienation of its control for the benefit of a private or public actor with a speculative purpose. Water grabbing, therefore, takes place when big dams are built and people are forcibly displaced from their dwellings, or when the mining sector exploits water in a manner that is unsustainable for the ecosystems and the community. It also takes place when the water that used to irrigate family farming and small-holders' tenures is diverted in favor of large-scale unsustainable agribusiness destined to export, or whenever river basins, aqueducts, water treatment and distribution systems are privatized or managed in a way that prevents the full participation of all the stakeholders and the local population.

Water grabbing is a major threat for the survival of ecosystems and communities, and it represents a clear violation of the human right to water. Nevertheless, big and small cases of water grabbing take place by hundreds everyday around the world. Whereas many powerful actors take advantage of water grabbing in many forms, this problem is still poorly discussed and very low on the agenda of priorities of policy-makers. If we want to achieve the Millennium Development Goal, and reverse this dangerous pattern in view of the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goal of the UN Agenda post-2015, we need to make our voice heard right now. We urgently need to expose this scandal to prevent it from further scaling-up.

Aims and objectives.

The problem of water grabbing calls for work in synergy and the identification of political strategies to protect and promote access to water as a human right and a common. To this effect, the international civil society actors engaged in the area of water and environmental justice are invited to meet at the heart of the Social Forum and discuss about the international campaign STOP WATER GRABBING that COSPE has launched, alongside with other civil society networks worldwide. The meeting's objectives include:

- make an assessment of the policies and programmes that are fostering different forms of water grabbing worldwide;
- share the lessons learnt and the good practices acquired through local and international initiatives of monitoring and advocacy put in practice by the CSO/NGO;
- foster the synergies with the international civil society actors fighting against the privatisation of water and the different forms of water grabbing, and for a new water governance;
- identify practical tools of international law, human rights and national legislations aiming to protect our rights to access water as a commons and a human right.

Logistics:

when: Thursday 26th March, 11.30am – 2.00pm

where: Tunis, Université Al Manar, room SP17

contact person: Luca Raineri, raineri@cospe-fi.it

Speakers and Contents

Nnimmo Bassey, Director of the Health of Mother Earth Foundation (Nigeria)
Introduction: water grabbing and environmental action

Jennifer Franco TNI (Netherlands)
Water Grabbing, history and geography of a global issue

Leonard Shang Quartey, ISODEC (Ghana)
Commodification of Water as water grabbing: from privatization to PPPs.

Toon Bijnens, Ercan Ayboga, Johanna Rivera, Save the Tigris Campaign (Iraq)
The crisis in Syria and Iraq and the current water question.

Richard Masimula Ngombo, COSPE (Swaziland)
Unsustainable farming, the struggle against sugar cane plantations in Southern Africa.

Christian Adams, Coastal Links (South Africa), **Mads Barbesgaard**, Africa Contact (Denmark)
The impact of water grabbing on fishing communities

Rosario Lembo, CICMA (Italy)
Countering Water Grabbing: Toward an International Treaty for the Human Right to Water.