

## Creating Spaces of Resistance: Jornadas[1] in the Defense of Water

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Every three years, the World Water Council (WWC), a Marseilles-based policy think tank run by the World Bank, development aid agencies like the United Nations, the major water corporations such as Vivendi and Suez, water ministries of a number of Northern countries, and water experts and professionals, hosts the World Water Forum (WWF). The forum is a formal gathering of governments,

international water experts and professionals, development aid institutions, water corporations and other agencies to discuss the fate of the world's water, likening itself to a United Nations conference. Its fourth edition was recently concluded in Mexico City, which ran from March 16 to 22.

The WWC has appropriated itself as the "Voice of Water"[2] in the international community, determining how the earth's diminishing freshwater resources will be governed, while local communities and the poor majority are effectively excluded due to the forum's inaccessibility and high entrance fees. Further, the World Water Forums, from Marrakech to Mexico, had been nothing but trade fairs showcasing corporations moving in on the global business of water service provision backed by the finance, trade and development agencies. Rather than the 'voice of water', "voice of the corporations" is a more apt description for the WWC.

Civil society resistance to the WWF has been growing. Thousands of 'water warriors', including rural and urban communities, students, trade unions, social movements, indigenous peoples, women groups, and NGOs, from various parts of the world gathered in Mexico City to take part in a week-long mobilization to defend the world's water. Dubbed as the Jornadas in the Defense of Water, the activities ranged from Mexican social movements camps and peoples' water tribunals to alternative forums, symposiums and protests. Jornadas are spaces to highlight local struggles against corporate control of their water, spaces for activists and movements to share their struggles, learn from each other and strategize together, and collectively build alternatives. Maude Barlow, National Chair of the Council of Canadians and co-founder of the Blue Planet Project, calls the Jornadas the "real world water forum".

## **Battles for and over Water**

More than one billion or 2 out of 10 people in the world lack access to safe water supply; 2.4 billion or 4 out of 10 people lack access to proper sanitation; 3,900 children die every year of preventable water-borne diseases such as cholera and dysentery; and majority of these people come from the rural areas.[3] The water crisis has become global and so has its governance. Water governance is a political process, informed and shaped by issues of power and power relations. Water has become one of the most contested resources, the last frontier of nature and the commons. It is a political tool which provoked the “wars of the 21st century”. And like any other war, it is replete with economic and political struggles. In some cases, serious conflicts and deaths result from such wars. The basis of distribution of water is no longer public interest or even universally accepted principles of human rights but narrow economic and financial factors, further increasing the gap between the “haves and have nots”.

These realities are condemned by the participants of the International Forum in the Defense of Water organized by the Coalition of Mexican Organizations in the Defense of Water (COMDA), from March 17-19 as part of the Jornadas. From the Philippines to Ghana, Bolivia to Canada, experiences are shared: widespread unequal access to safe water and sanitation, increasing inequitable charging of water rates, local communities traditionally nurturing this resource being cut off from its benefits, groundwater and aquifer getting depleted and contaminated by extractive industries, water scarcity, diversion and trapping of water from large dams, water becoming commoditized and corporatized, and so on. Participants lamented the failures of privatization efforts in their own communities, and how these robbed communities of control and agency over water, and led, to the destruction of long-held systems of resource tenure and stewardship in favor of new systems centered on modern economic priorities. The results have been ever-increasing conflicts.

Clamors for the de-commodification of water, improved access, people’s control over the use, management and protection of water resources, better condition for public water laborers, appropriate ecological-management systems, appropriate technology and infrastructure, among others, have been clear. The week-long event proved that water has become one of the pivotal arenas around which social mobilizations and campaigns are launched. Cochabamba, El Alto and Accra, are testimonies to the growing global resistance to water privatization. People now fight back.

### **“Public Water for All”**

From the Jornadas emerged a consensus that privatization is a comprehensive and multi-pronged strategy driven by the desires and profit motives of transnational corporations – and met by a counter-discourse focusing on alternatives. The Jornadas’ vision[4] strongly upholds water as a human right. As a public trust and part of the ‘global commons’, corporations have no business profiting from the peoples’ need for water. It recognizes that governments are failing to fulfill their responsibilities to their constituencies and the environment. To address this, emphasis is given to democratization in water governance,

social participation and integrated water management respectful of traditional and mindful of the sustainability issues.

An essential component of the Jornadas vision is the promotion of water Public-Public Partnerships (PUPs)[5] as a counterbalance to privatization and Public-Private Partnerships. After all, 90% of the water supply worldwide is still operated and managed by public water utilities and deserves much attention and support. Eighty-three percent of global financing for water supply and sanitation in 2000[6] was obtained from national sources and majority of which from public coffers, while only 12% and 5% were from multilateral and bilateral donors and international private sector, respectively. The failed privatization projects also show that money is not coming in as staunch advocates like the World Bank promised.

Evidence that it is possible to improve public water delivery, and that their weaknesses and deficiencies are not terminal, abounds. In the town of Varages in France, home to big French water companies such as Suez and Vivendi, the trend is towards re-municipalization of the water system. The town canceled their contract with Suez and other water multinationals. In Penang, Malaysia, the most efficient water utility provides the cheapest water rates yet still earns millions of dollars in revenues; and it is public. The Federation of Neighborhood Committees (FEJUVE) in El Alto, Bolivia is about to introduce the proposal towards a “public-social” company in the city, sans the private sector. PUPs do not only debunk the myth that private sector participation is needed to improve access to clean water and sanitation in developing countries, these models also are testimonies that financing of water and actual investments are being done largely by the public (either through user fees or taxpayers’ money). For example, people in Xoxocotla, Mexico and Taguig, Philippines formed neighborhood associations to invest in the pipelines and are organizing on the ground to manage their water systems and resources.

The Jornadas also made the case for other concrete alternatives for the building of water infrastructure for the poor. According to Patrick McCully, Executive Director of the International Rivers Network, “there are many technologically easy and relatively cheap options for water and energy provision that can help lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, end widespread hunger, and reduce the daily workload of women and children.”[7] The message: “small is beautiful” and water strategies focused on big infrastructure projects such as mega-dams cannot reduce poverty, much more solve the looming global water crisis. Low-cost technologies such as rainwater harvesting and treadle pumps are already being implemented on the ground. Getting political and institutional support for these innovations, however, is a challenge which the water justice movements have to meet head on.

### **Women at the Forefront of the Struggle**

It is not only the UN which recognizes the ‘special’ role and responsibilities of women in water provision. More importantly, the participants of the Jornadas acknowledged how water is “gendered”. Women’s lives around the world are closely connected to water,

from providing, managing and safeguarding water for drinking, food preparation, crop irrigation, personal hygiene, etc. to ensuring adequate sanitation for all the family members. Women, especially indigenous women, have extensive knowledge about water resources—location, quality, storage, conservation and management.

These roles and responsibilities are often overlooked in water resources management and decision-making processes. Yet as the experiences in Tamil Nadu, La Lucha Parota, El Alto and Mazahua, among others showed, women are at the forefront of struggles, continuously organizing people on the ground to ensure equitable access to safe water and sanitation. The “Blue Agenda of Mexican Women”, is another women-initiated project that seeks to identify the various water problems at home, in agriculture and in the environment, and promotes solutions to conflicting claims over water while recognizing the need for a new water culture. The project advances gender equity in management of water resources. The Jornadas opened up a lot of spaces for women’s voices to be heard. And for a lot of women, this in itself is already empowerment.

### **Global Movement to Defend Water**

Mexico City is both a witness and testimony to the growing strength, legitimacy and power of the water justice movements. The movements felt that they are turning the tide, that they are on the ‘offensive’. Inside the World Water Forum, for instance, there is little talk of privatization. Instead many participants in the forum emphasized reliance on the local public utilities. It is doubtful, however, whether the World Water Council and its coterie are serious about shelving its privatization efforts. For sure, new tactics, mechanisms, and strategies on how to extract profit from the people are already being explored. Investing in the water sector is a risky business and they would not pour in money unless there are more public guarantees, immunity and risk mitigation mechanisms in place.

The recognition that the world’s water is publicly owned is a temporary retreat for corporations. Such recognition is by and large a product of the water justice movements’ campaigns to expose the failures of water privatization worldwide and how communities are fighting back.

With victories come more challenges. There is still a long way to go, much to be done, especially in terms of international solidarity and strengthening local struggles. Global support and solidarity are needed for Bolivia, Argentina, the Philippines and other countries as efforts to re-privatize water are renewed. Many communities are still vulnerable to the commodification of water by cash-strapped governments and institutions that back them up.

The crisis of water governance has indeed become global. A comprehensive and holistic approach to solving the global water crisis is also necessary. The participants of the Jornadas called for the linking of water services issues to resource management; rural to urban issues; public health safety to ecological and environmental issues; land and water

issues; and the need to bridge the gap between public financing, infrastructure and technology.

The struggle to defend and reclaim water must also be placed in the wider struggle to defend the commons such as land, intellectual property, etc., the broader fight against corporate-driven globalization, and broader shifts in political powers at the national and international contexts.

Given their experience and relative success, the global water justice movements are no doubt up to the challenge.

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[1] Jornadas is a Mexican word which stands for rallies or mobilizations. It was organized by the National Peoples' Assembly of Mexico.

[2] See Loic Fauchon, President of the World Water Council, Foreword, in the Mexico 2006: 4th World Water Forum's Official Delegate Publication.

[3] See United Nations-Water, Water for Life Decade publication, 2006. Also see Spreading the Wealth: Making Infrastructure Work for the Poor, International Rivers Network, 2006.

[4] For more information about the global water movement on the "Right to Water", see Maude Barlow's article, "The World Water Forum and its Civil Society Opposition" in [www.blueplanetproject.net](http://www.blueplanetproject.net).

[5] See "Public Water for All: The Role of Public-Public Partnerships", A Reclaiming Public Water discussion paper, published by the Transnational Institute and Corporate Europe Observatory, March 2006.

[6] See Jenina Joy Chavez-Malaluan's "The Question of Water: Notes on Regional and International Issues", power point presented for the Water Commons Institute, Quezon City, January 27, 2006.

[7] Spreading the Wealth: Making Infrastructure Work for the Poor, International Rivers Network, March 2006.