
Struggles for water and for the climate: everybody's business

In this increasingly privatized world, to talk about water is almost synonymous with talking about its appropriation by some company to turn it into merchandise and source of profit. The seriousness of the situation has been understood by many people and has led to major struggles – sometimes pacific, sometimes violent – to avoid it passing into the hands of transnational corporations.

However, the role of transnational corporations goes far beyond the drinking water business and extends from pollution to the destruction of ecosystems that ensure the functioning of the water cycle.

Water does not become polluted on its own and the origin of its pollution is, in most cases, linked to large transnational corporations that either directly pollute or produce and sell contaminating substances that end up by poisoning the water.

In the first place, oil and mining companies stand out, dumping enormous quantities of contaminating substances in the areas where they settle. Secondly, come the companies that produce and sell toxic substances which have water as their final destination. Of course these are not the only companies involved, but they undoubtedly occupy an outstanding place on the long list of contaminating companies.

A different but equally serious case is that of the companies involved in the construction of major hydroelectric dams that destroy entire ecosystems – both aquatic and forest – affecting the innumerable species – including humans – that depend on them.

Shrimp farming companies are in a similar situation. Not only do they pollute water resources but also destroy mangrove ecosystems that are so important for the defence of coastal systems and related life.

Another case is that of companies involved in pulp production that install enormous fast-growing monoculture tree plantations to supply their factories with raw material. These trees consume – at no expense to the company – vast amounts of water, drying out wetlands, lagoons and water courses. Meanwhile, their enormous factories use water for their industrial processing for free, and return it polluted to the same water course they took it from.

The list is too long to compress it in an article, but it may generally be said that in all this process of destruction of water and of the ecosystems necessary to ensure the functioning of the water cycle, there is always at least one, and in most cases several, transnational corporations that have actually appropriated the resource.

In all cases, those most adversely affected are the local inhabitants, whose lives depend on the ecosystems and on the water resources polluted or degraded by these companies. Among urban inhabitants, the poorest are the most adversely affected as they find themselves obliged to buy bottled water because tap water is polluted. In turn, among the local inhabitants, those most adversely affected are usually women who are differentially hit by the changes on a local level.

On a more macro level, the greatest danger to water is related to climate change. On the one hand because one of its main causes – deforestation – has a negative impact on the water cycle. In fact the destruction of vast areas of forests affects the occurrence of rain and groundwater infiltration. On the other hand because climate change in itself entirely changes the hydrological regime, with the outcome of extreme phenomena such as droughts and floods.

Needless to say, behind the climate change phenomenon it is possible to identify major transnational corporations that are profiting either from deforestation processes or from exploitation and sale of fossil fuels and, more recently from carbon trading which they invented to obtain even greater profits from climate change, converted into a business.

For the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of the planet, water cannot be equated to a business and even less can climate change be thus considered. Water contamination and scarcity, as well as, climate change are disasters to be avoided and not goods to be negotiated. Struggles – local, national and international – against the different processes and actors affecting water and the climate are not struggles of “opposition” but of affirmation: for the lives of this generation and future ones.