

Subvert - A podcast by Corporate Accountability

Title A powerful wave: dispatch from the Africa Week of Action Against Water Privatisation

Description

In this episode, we hear from water activists rising against privatization across the African continent. Against the backdrop of the World Bank meetings and a mega-merger between the two largest private water corporations, Veolia and Suez, organizers are saying a resounding no to water privatization and an enthusiastic yes to public water solutions.

Show Notes

Stand in solidarity with water justice organizers rising up to say no to water privatization at corporateaccountability.org/ProtectTheWater.

This episode featured Akinbode Oluwafemi of CAPP; Dr. Everline Aketch of Public Services International, and Oumar Ba, via interpretation by Jeff Zerbo.

You can learn more about the [Africa week of action against water privatization](#) here.

Transcript

Lena: There are a few things we all need to survive. Air to breathe, food to eat, water to drink. Too often, corporate abuse makes it difficult to access those things.

In Lagos, Nigeria, and across the African continent, the private water industry, led by corporations like Veolia and Suez, have been trying to take control of the water systems there. They're in the process of pursuing contracts that could lock in generations of thirst and deprivation.

While these corporations have had their way in some places, rendering the water situation worse off and leaving countless people to feel the consequences, water privatizers have come up against intense opposition across Africa.

This week there's mass mobilization across the continent and the globe to stand up to these corporations, the international institutions that support them, and the governments entertaining contracts with them. This mobilization is both resisting impending threats and challenging existing ones. Today, we'll be hearing from organizers standing up to the private water industry and demanding that governments fulfill and protect the human right to water.

You're listening to Subvert, a podcast from Corporate Accountability. I'm Lena Greenberg, I use they/them pronouns, and I'll be your host today. Thanks for joining us.

The year is 2021. One in four people in the world does not have enough clean water to drink, cook, clean, and bathe. The COVID-19 pandemic rages on. The climate emergency is increasingly dire. Global inequality is at an all time high. To make matters worse, global corporations like Veolia and Suez, supported by institutions like the World Bank, are profiting from the global water crisis and privatizing our most essential public service. In so doing, these corporations and institutions are undermining economic, social, and cultural rights, including our fundamental human right to water.

In recent decades, the private water industry and its backers have turned their sights toward the African continent as the next expansion market for their profit driven agenda.

But even as these crises converge, there is cause for hope. A ground swell of organizing across the continent is cresting to a powerful wave this week with the World Bank and International Monetary Funds' annual meetings underway. While those powerful decision makers are wining and dining with international financiers and executives, organizers on the ground in Nigeria, Mozambique, Ghana, Gabon, Kenya, Cameroon, Uganda, and Senegal have mobilized to say no to water privatization and yes to public water systems; yes to policies that prioritize public health and fair labor practices; and a resounding yes to protecting the human right to water.

When private water corporations take over a public water system, the focus shifts from providing universal access to maximizing profit for private shareholders. This shift is at the core of so many harms that privatization has brought to communities around the world.

Private operators are less inclined to maintain affordable water access than public operators, especially in low-income communities, because their priority is extracting as much profit as they can. Corporate control of water also has negative environmental impacts, from a contamination crisis that left nearly all the residents in Osorno, Chile without water for 10 days, to torrents of untreated sewage spilling in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

Ensuring universal access to safe water has always been a challenge, but this week is a particularly pivotal one for protecting access and preventing privatization. This Monday, the World Bank and IMF commence their annual meetings. Meanwhile, Veolia and Suez, the two largest water prioritizers in the world, are inching toward a merger, consolidating even more control over water into the hands of a few in the Global North.

Let's pause and talk about what's wrong with the World Bank. The World Bank is an immensely powerful international financial institution. Historically, it's been one of the biggest drivers of anti-people policies that have devastated communities around the world, especially in the Global South. The neoliberal playbook of austerity, deregulation, and privatization has been aggressively imposed by the World Bank and other international financial institutions on Global South countries for decades. It's played no small part in the crisis we see today.

The World Bank has even used the COVID pandemic to push its pro-privatization ideology, baking it right into its so-called recovery plan for the years to come. The legacies of colonialism inherent in the World Bank's approach cannot be ignored. Here are a few: locking Global South countries into generations of debt and facilitating the corporate control of their natural resources and economies, largely to the benefit of corporations based in the Global North.

The decision-making at the World Bank is also unabashedly undemocratic. Despite the fact that its policies and projects are almost exclusively in the Global South, the institution is headquartered in Washington, DC, has always been led by a person nominated by the United States, and the vote share that member countries have is directly proportional to the funds that they contribute. That means that the United States and European powers have an outsized and inappropriate level of control over the policies that impact the daily lives of people around the world.

The World Bank has long greased the wheels of water privatization, from pushing countries into privatization contracts, to directly investing in private water corporations. Private water giants like Veolia and Suez have been some of the biggest beneficiaries of the banks' aggressive push for privatization, from Latin America, to Asia, to Africa. All of this is despite a decades long track record of failure and human rights abuses.

While dogged organizing and coalition building has dealt the industry some major blows, from forcing the World Bank to divest from Veolia, to stopping water privatization in Lagos, Nigeria. The threat of privatization spread across the Global South remains and must be taken seriously. Last but not least, these privatization contracts are often decades long. That means the decisions made today will have impacts for generations to come. What happens this week will impact the lives and livelihoods of the children and grandchildren of people mobilizing for water justice today and millions of others. With the weight of the World Bank behind it, the threat that the private water industry poses to water access in Africa cannot be overstated.

So, this week, people are coming together across the African continent in an unprecedented show of unity to stop the World Bank, Veolia, and Suez's agenda of water privatization and unbound profits. Here are some of those organizers' voices:

Bode: Today, we are calling on the World Bank and the IFC to stop pushing water privatization agenda that they have been using to drive the commodification of water on our continent.

Lena: That's Akinbode Oluwafemi, he's the executive director of Corporate Accountability Public Participation Africa, which has been leading the movement against water privatization in Lagos, Nigeria for years.

Bode: We are using this opportunity to call on the IMF, the World Bank, and all the development banks, to divest from the private water corporations and stop the promotion of water privatization on our continent. Our government should begin to work together towards the achievement of the human rights to water. From wherever you turn on this continent, the threat of water privatization is great from Cameroon, to Gabon, to Uganda, to Kenya, and of course to Nigeria, and several of the countries across the region.

We have seen the attempt by water multinationals to take over public utility. Our message also to the African people is to join this movement where we begin to mobilize our people to reject privatization and all its ramifications.

Lena: Here's Dr. Everline Aketch of Public Services International, speaking to impacts of water privatization on workers and the role of labor in the movement against privatization.

Dr. Everline Aketch: Every time there is privatization, the prices or tariffs on that particular sector actually goes up. Research and practical examples have actually shown that every time there's privatization of public services, there's tendency of increased outsourcing of workers. We've seen a number of layoffs taking place as a result of privatization, because the main aim of a privateer is to maximize profit.

The easiest cost for you to reduce is actually the labor cost. So we've seen a number of people losing their jobs and also recorded a decrease in terms of working conditions with poor occupational health and safety to the workers. There's been a bit of a decrease in terms of union membership, and not only that, the bargaining power that helps the workers to obtain this at work has drastically reduced, especially within the context of privatization.

What is the role as labor movements? The cardinal role of every trade union or labor movement is to protect and defend the interest of workers, in public or private sector. Being liberals at the center and being citizens, make us guardians of good governance and part of democratic governance.

So what can we actually do in that aspect, in terms of stopping prioritization and also calling for re-municipalization of some of those countries that have already privatized their water sector. One is that you can act as whistleblowers, in terms of some of the proposed contracts that promote PPPs.

Lena: PPPs are Public Private Partnerships, which refer to contracts between corporations and governments.

Dr. Everline Aketch: PPPs are becoming the greatest drivers of corruption in most of our countries. So we can actually undertake whistle blowing in terms of exposing some of the contents of these contracts or some of the people who want to push for privatization within this sector.

Another thing that we can actually do as labor, which is critical, is to call upon our governments and policy makers to increase their funding towards public infrastructure of water, and also provide policy alternatives to PPPs. So, we as labor movements, join other civil societies to note that that water is actually life.

Lena: This is Omar Ba, an environmental engineer from Senegal. He spoke in French, so the voice you're hearing is the interpreter, Jeff Zerbo:

Oumar: I worked in the water sector for more than eight years. In 1996 there was a partial privatization. What are the consequences of the privatization? We have noticed that water has become more expensive and some people do not have access to water. So, they decide to get water from well or from rivers, since you don't have access to potable water. There are some area who do not have water, in the morning they have water, in the evening they do not have water. So in the end, the population has decided to complain.

So the population is suffering under the private sectors, the quality of their service is not guaranteed. Rural areas are being now managed by Suez, which is already managing the urban area, but that company has already shown its limit and this is not good news for the future. So faced with that situation, the population is just trying to survive. Water is very important for everyone, so what should we do? Are we going to help the population have access to water? Because it is only a portion of the population that is having access to potable water.

To do our best to fight against that privatization, and we have to make sure that the public aspect of these resources should be made available for everyone. Because without water, our quality of life will be impacted. So that is the situation in Senegal and we are ready for work. We stand ready to work and to work together and to fight against those big corporations.

Lena: If these stories have inspired you to join the movement for water justice and act in solidarity with the organizers rising up to say no to water privatization, you can take action online at corporateaccountability.org/protectthewater. Again, that's corporateaccountability.org/protectthewater.

Thank you so much to Akinbode Oluwafemi, Dr. Everline Aketch, Oumar Ba, and Jeff Zerbo.

Lena: Deep gratitude as well for the Corporate Accountability Public Participation Africa team, all the water justice organizers in the Our Water, Our Right Africa Coalition, and the organizations from around the world that have endorsed the coalition's demands.

This episode was written by me, Lena Greenberg. Eric Johnson and I co-produced the show. And Eric wrote our music. Thanks for listening!