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Blue Future: Protecting Water for People and the Planet Forever

Maude Barlow's speech at the OeME-Herbsttagung 2015

Berne, November 28, 2015

I am delighted to return to your wonderful reform church to share this day celebrating Blue Communities here in Switzerland and around the world. In a world with many troubles, it is important to celebrate our progress in the areas of human rights and water protection. Outside of Canada, Switzerland has more Blue Communities than anywhere else.

Yet the concept is taking off. Cambuquira Brazil has become the first Blue Community in South America as it is trying to protect its beautiful mineral water heritage from being destroyed by Nestlé like the neighboring town of Sao Lourenco, where the company took over their water park, famous for its healing properties, to get access to some of the purest water in the world for export. Berlin has a group organizing to have that city become a Blue Community and we are working with a number of cities on the American side of the Great Lakes who also want to declare themselves "Blue." And we are proud of our 18 Canadian municipalities that have pioneered this concept.

Originally envisaged as a way to protect water as a human right and a public trust, the concept is growing. Bern added the promise to promote public-public partnerships instead of the World Bank-favoured public-private partnerships that have created so much hardship and opposition in the global South. Some communities want to extend the definition of a Blue Community to include bans on fracking or intrusive mining practices that destroy local water sources.

Like the fight for the human rights to water and sanitation, Blue Communities will develop and evolve with time and the wisdom of the local groups, municipalities, faith-based communities, universities and unions.

Why do we need Blue Communities?

The world has a major water crisis we are just beginning to understand. We are damming our rivers to death and mining groundwater far faster than nature can replenish it. Using bore well technology only perfected in recent decades, humans are depleting the water supplies of future generations.

US-based NASA has recently discovered how to use satellite technology to assess the earth's groundwater supplies. In a report several months ago, the agency said that of the 37 major aquifers in the world, 21 are in serious trouble and 8 are being sucked dry.

Over half the rivers in China have disappeared. Twenty two countries in Africa are in water crisis, as are India and Pakistan. Mexico City is sinking as all the groundwater has been pumped and huge parts of the United States are experiencing severe drought. Once water-rich Brazil is also in severe drought, having cut down the rainforest that provided moisture for the air currents called "flying rivers" that used to carry rain to a now desperate Sao Paulo.

One global study said that at current water consumption, our demand for water will outstrip supply by 40 percent by 2030.

Clearly this impacts our struggle to provide safe clean and accessible water and sanitation for the world. As the insatiable demand for water grows, there is a grab by the powerful, and many poor people in both the global North and the global South are being left behind.

There have been real and exciting improvements since 2010 when the UN recognized the human rights to water and sanitation.

At the UN, every country now recognizes these rights and the Special Rapporteurs on the human rights to water and sanitation have traveled and written extensively to ensure governments around the world take their obligations on this issue seriously.

About four dozen countries have either enshrined the right to water within their national constitutions or in new legislation. After Mexico amended its constitution to recognize the human right to water, civil society groups used it to successfully challenge a water privatization bill put forward by the government.

Courts are also being used to challenge violations of the right to water. Governments are now obliged to implement the right to water into their national legal systems and courts are now obliged to ensure their laws are interpreted consistently with international human rights law.

The Bombay High Court ruled that the city government was duty bound to supply water to illegal slums. An Indonesian court annulled a public-private partnership saying it violated the human right to water. A French court banned water cut-offs in that country. A court in Flint Michigan made the same ruling.

And we were very pleased that we managed to safeguard the human right to water in the SDGs, not without a huge fight I might add! The UN likes to assure us it has made great progress in fulfilling the promises of the 2000 millennium goal on drinking water but we are well aware that the UN gets their statistics from the number of new pipes that are installed in a country, not whether those pipes are accessible, or carrying contaminated water or out of reach of the poor price wise.

In fact, even with the successes just outlined, the problems are still staggering. 2.5 billion people have no access to sanitation. A lack of investment in water, hygiene, and sanitation infrastructure has hindered progress. And even where access has improved, almost 2 billion people are forced to use a source of water that is contaminated. Water cut offs have spread to rich countries here in Europe and the United States where tens of thousands have had their water cut off from an inability to pay the high water rates.

As well, many governments have other priorities. They pay lip service to these water human rights but in many countries, indigenous peoples bear the brunt of violations. Many governments give priority access to mining, energy and agribusiness corporations and look the other way when they pollute local water sources. Real life and death decisions are made when some governments deny water to villagers, small farmers, indigenous people and slum dwellers in favour of industrial development and free trade zones.

Adherence to macro-economic policies such as unlimited growth, deregulation of environmental protections and corporate-driven free trade agreements such as CETA and TTIP give corporations more rights than citizens and in some cases, even their governments.

Many governments favor military and security spending over providing basic services. Global military spending now stands at \$1.76 trillion annually, a sum that towers over the estimated \$10 billion it would take to provide water services to all.

Corporations have undue influence at the World Bank and the UN. Switzerland's Nestlé head, Peter Brabeck, advises the World Bank on privatization of water services in poor countries while making huge profits selling his Pure Life water to the poor. This is a profound conflict of interest.

So we must continue to advocate for the human right to water while we work to save the planet's precious water supplies. That means defending water as a public trust and a commons that belongs to local communities and ecosystems as well as future generations. Governments hold these water sources in trust and all uses of water must be judged by the twin criteria of justice of access and sustainability of the watershed. Water must never be appropriated for private profit or put on the open market for sale.

Similarly we must reject public-private partnerships. Public Services International reports that the best guarantee of success for safe drinking water is public delivery by governments and that even the poorest governments, with help and support, can provide water and sanitation to their people. Over a ten year period, water services can be delivered for less than 1 percent of each country's GDP.

It is a contradiction to support and benefit from public services in countries like Canada and Switzerland while promoting private services in the global South and sending our corporations there to make money. If public water services are right here, why not everywhere? In fact since 2000, 235 municipalities, including Berlin and Paris, have rejected their privatization experiments and brought their water services back under public control.

That is why it is very important for governments and aid agencies of the global North such as Alliance Sud to promote public-public partnerships in developing countries. The UN is very clear that it is governments who have the primary responsibility to uphold the human rights to water and sanitation, even when the services are given out to a third party. They must be transparent, involve the community and enforce standards, all of which private water operators studiously avoid.

We need the voice of the Swiss agencies to support water as a human right, public trust and public service. This is a crucial moment in our struggle for water justice.

In closing, here are the most urgent tasks before us:

- 1) Use the SDGs and the UN resolutions to push our courts and governments even farther in fulfilling the promise of water for all. Use them to stop worldwide cut offs and destruction of local water sources by extractive industry.
- 2) Put the human rights to water and sanitation at the heart of the ecological struggle to protect watersheds. Countries hit by droughts and water shortages are now coming up with serious plans to deal with their water crises. The most vulnerable must be protected within these plans or they will be left behind.
- 3) Fight for a just economy where trade agreements and the economy serve people and local communities, not the other way around. The top 1 Percent now own 50 percent of the world's wealth. This polarization is reflected in water injustice and must be stopped.
- 4) Promote Blue Communities here in Switzerland and around the world. In a world fighting poverty, climate change, violence and terrorism, it is wonderful to have a project based on hope so that water stewards everywhere can take a positive stand for water justice and human rights.

Thank you!