

# Foreword

*By Célia Blauel*

However we choose to evoke the global movement of remunicipalisation of water and sanitation services – whether we call it a groundswell, a backlash or a paradigm shift – what is clear is that it is expanding at an exponential rate. One of the fundamental messages of this book is that despite prevailing discourses on the comparative advantages of the privatisation of public services, a counter-attack is underway and is spreading throughout the world.

Although there is often an emphasis on the technical aspects of the remunicipalisation process, it is primarily a political principle that is fuelling it. Water is a commons and cannot be treated as a commodity; its rightful place is in the hands of the public. It is indeed unacceptable that water – a vital commons for all of humanity – should be used to generate revenue that is paid out to a handful of shareholders. How can we accept that a profit-centred logic dominates over one that prioritises preserving a precious and indispensable resource? Remunicipalisation originates in the assertion of shared values and in the recognition of the need to prioritise transparency and citizen-based management.

As this book illustrates, moving towards public management of water and sanitation services is also an antidote to the private sector's shortcomings. Among the most frequent problems with private water management are lack of financial transparency and excessive price hikes that are completely disconnected from real operating costs. Paris's return to local council management in 2010 thus resulted in an immediate budgetary gain of 35 million euros for water services. This serves to clearly illustrate that the choice to remunicipalise not only resulted in greater transparency but also in public funds being put to better use, for the benefit of citizens and the common good.

The wave of remunicipalisation has also given rise to a new generation of public companies that are beginning to play a stronger role in the water sector. These public companies, which are driven by strong values of quality, responsibility, and sustainable and socially-minded management, are creating an economic model for the future.

They have clearly demonstrated the extent of their performance and efficiency, which up until now have been wrongly associated with the private sector alone. Public water companies, which have proven to be both technically and financially efficient, are currently just as much at the forefront of innovative production and distribution solutions as private ones.

And in a sector as particular as that of water and sanitation services, the economic and industrial project of public companies cannot be separated from the political and social project of making water accessible to everyone by managing it in a sustainable way.

When we talk about the future of water today, it is not only a question of protecting a commons that should stay clear of market ambitions and unwarranted profits. It is also a question of taking responsibility for a resource under threat due to climate change and environmental issues.

In the spring of 2015, the drought in California once again grimly alerted us to the challenges that not only water operators, but our societies as a whole face. The duration and intensity of the drought, combined with poor management of water resources, has had disastrous consequences despite the fact that it occurred in a region emblematic that is a paragon of wealth and modernity. Not only is the security of water resources at stake. So is the wellbeing of impoverished people who are faced with the reality of insufficient water for drinking. Agriculture is equally at risk of being profoundly affected.

Climate change and the ensuing threats to water resources necessitates that immediate action be taken in regards to anticipating potential problems related to the quality and quantity of water resources. Eau de Paris is just one example of the many public companies that are committed to taking this route and that are implementing ambitious measures in order to reduce consumption and ensure the availability of drinking water. We are also working to develop organic farming and create partnerships with farmers in order to reduce pollution at the source. This innovative approach, which entails a long-term perspective and which fully incorporates the different aspects of sustainable development, reveals the uniqueness of our policies, which are focussed on the common good of both present and future generations.

The first challenge of remunicipalisation has been met. This book leaves no doubt as to the relevance, effectiveness, and robustness of the public water model. It is now time to take the next step.

We need to intensify supportive measures around returning to public management. Over the coming years, our public water companies are dedicated to investing as much energy in supporting local governments and citizen movements as has been invested in the past. We need to assert our presence both locally and internationally. Building on our expertise and governance, we are deeply committed to promoting and supporting public management, as we have done with Aqua Publica Europea.

Beyond that, it is essential that water companies understand the full extent of the role they play in fighting climate change.

Water has a direct impact on the capacity of cities to deal with climate destabilisation. Water management and urban development go hand in hand and require a comprehensive approach, an overall vision. Water policies (and public operators play a key role in developing these) not only ensure access to safe, clean water at the lowest possible price, but also assist in protecting the environment, preventing floods, and curbing the effects of urban heat islands. Public water companies have succeeded in demonstrating that they are just as

competent and efficient as the private sector. Because public companies' concerns are centred on the common good, they are also focussed on dealing with the real issues of the future. In the year of COP21, public operators need to seize this historic opportunity and claim their role as key players in helping our societies adapt to the reality of climate change.

Proud of the public service that we are providing every day, and empowered by the relationships of solidarity that connect us to each other through water operator networks, we are determined to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Public water companies are key players wherever they are operating, and they are set to grow all over the world.

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