

THE STRUGGLE AGAINST WATER PRIVATISATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

By Dale T. McKinley

BACKGROUND

In 1955, the main liberation movement in South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC), adopted the Freedom Charter as a popular expression of the desires of the majority of South Africans. One of the most important clauses in the charter - which the present-day ANC government still cites as their guiding manifesto - states that “the national wealth of our country, the heritage of all South Africans, shall be restored to the people”.

The majority of South Africans, made up of the poor and working class, fought and died not just for political freedom from apartheid, but for socio-economic freedom and justice; for the redistribution of all “national wealth”. An integral part of that national wealth is water, a natural resource essential to all life. When the majority of South Africans gave political victory to the ANC in 1994, they were also giving the new government the power to fulfil the charter and ensure natural resources like water would be controlled by, and be accessible to all citizens irrespective of race or class. This popular mandate was captured in the Reconstruction & Development Programme (RDP), which formed the basis of the people’s contract with the new, democratic government. However, it did not take long for the ANC government to abandon that popular mandate by unilaterally deciding to pursue a water policy that has produced the opposite result.

Before the end of 1994, the South African government had introduced its policy on water in direct violation of the RDP commitment to lifeline supply. This gave the water officials the authority to provide water only if they could fully recover the costs of operating, maintenance and replacement. In 1996, the adoption of a new macro-economic approach, known as Growth, Employment & Redistribution (GEAR), located the policies on water and other basic needs within a neo-liberal framework.

Following the neo-liberal economic advice of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and various western governments (and heavy lobbying by private multinational water companies such as Suez and Bewater), the government drastically decreased grants and subsidies to local municipalities and city councils, and supported the development of financial instruments for privatised delivery. This effectively forced local government to turn to the commercialisation and privatisation of basic services as a means of generating the revenue no longer provided by the state. Many local government structures began to privatise and / or corporatise public water utilities by entering into service and management “partnerships” with multinational water corporations.

THE IMPACT

The immediate result was a massive increase in the price of water that necessarily hit poor communities the hardest. The neo-liberal-inspired cost-recovery policy – ie, making people pay for the associated costs of water infrastructure – led to this dramatic increase. Under apartheid (1993), the black townships around the Eastern Cape town of Fort Beaufort paid a flat rate of R10,60 for all services, including water and refuse removal. Under privatisation (Suez), from 1994 to 1996, the service

charges were increased by 600% to R60 per month. A 100% increase in water connection costs was also imposed. In another Eastern Cape town, Queenstown, a similar picture emerged with a 150% increase in service costs. In the north-eastern city of Nelspruit (Bewater), where the unemployment rate hovers around 40% and average black household annual income is a paltry R1,2000, the price of water delivered to black communities increased by up to 69%! The cost recovery policy caused a national affordability crisis for black townships as well as rural communities.

These early price increases were only further exacerbated by the need to “recover” additional, huge costs associated with the World Bank-funded Lesotho Highlands Water Project. (This project featured dams built to provide water for South Africa’s largest city, Johannesburg, and surrounding large-scale mining and manufacturing industries.) The first price hike instituted by the newly privatised water service in Johannesburg (the Johannesburg Water Company and Suez’s South African subsidiary) was an astronomical 55%. Despite vigorous opposition from the union movement, especially the South African Municipal Workers’ Union and newly emergent (mostly urban-based) social movements, the government persisted in its pursuit of privatising water.

Taking the World Bank’s advice to introduce a “credible threat of cutting service”, the Johannesburg city council and other councils across the country began cutting off water services to people who could not afford the increased prices. The full-cost recovery model punted by the World Bank – ie, tariff revenue sufficient to meet operations and maintenance costs, without any public subsidies to keep prices in check – has seen the water services of over 10 million people being cut off. Additionally, more than two million have been evicted from their homes, often as a part of the associated legal process to

recover debt from poor “customers”. Those communities without previous access to clean water have either suffered the same fate since the infrastructure was provided or have simply had to make do with sourcing water from polluted streams and far-away boreholes.

The collective impact of water privatisation on the majority of South Africans has been devastating. The desperate search for any available source of water has resulted in cholera outbreaks that have claimed the lives of hundreds. In the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal, the country’s biggest cholera outbreak occurred in 2000 as a result of changing the free communal tap system to a (privatised) pre-paid metering system. Over 120,000 people were infected with cholera and more than 300 people died.

Not long after the French multinational, Suez, took over Johannesburg’s water supply, an outbreak of cholera in the township of Alexandra affected thousands of families. In both these cases, it was only after the national government was forced to step in as a result of community mobilisation and pressure that the disease was brought under control. Inadequate hygiene and “self-serve” sanitation systems have also led to continuous exposure (especially for children) to various preventable diseases. There has been an increase in environmental pollution and degradation arising from uncontrolled effluent discharges and scarcity of water for food production. In addition, the dignity of entire communities has been ripped apart, as the right to the most basic of human needs, water, has been turned into a restricted privilege available only to those who can afford it.

COMMUNITY STRUGGLES

In response to these privatisation measures, communities in large urban areas such as Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town, as well as many smaller towns and peri-urban areas across the country, have responded with active resistance. One of the new social movements that has taken the lead in this resistance is the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), an umbrella organisation for grassroots groups primarily located in Gauteng province (which includes Johannesburg and Pretoria). Formed in 2000, APF’s guiding principle has been that basic needs, such as water, are a fundamental human right, not a privilege to be enjoyed only by those who can afford it.

Throughout the privatisation process, APF (alongside other social movements and, to a lesser extent, the union movement) has mobilised and organised poor communities and workers to oppose it. Educational and legal initiatives have been combined with regular mass action aimed at empowering ordinary people to assert their right to free basic services (water, electricity, education and housing). As a result, the Coalition Against Water Privatisation (CAWP) was formed in late 2003, bringing together a range of social movements and progressive NGOs in a collective effort to turn the tide against water privatisation.

With the assistance of APF and CAWP, residents have launched a campaign called Operation Vulamanzi (“water for all”), which has helped physically bypass some privatised water control measures, such as pre-paid meters and trickler systems. Water pipes have been re-routed to allow free access to water and, in the process, strike a grassroots blow for the “decommodification” of water and self-empowering of the community. In some communities, residents have destroyed pre-paid meters in an overt act of defiance against privatised water delivery.

Displaying their contempt for the constitutional and human rights of the poor, ANC politicians and government bureaucrats have publicly labelled those who resist privatisation as criminals and anarchists who want to create a “culture of non-payment”. These attacks have been accompanied by a large-scale crackdown on community dissent and resistance. Over the last three years, hundreds of activists and community members have been arrested and imprisoned.

While anti-privatisation struggles have not yet succeeded in halting the process, popular pressure forced the government to implement a partial free-water policy in late 2002. However, there are still millions of people who do not receive the “free” 6000 litres of water per household per month allocated through this policy, an amount that does not meet even the basic sanitation requirements of the average household. (The World Health Organisation specifies a minimum of 100 litres of water per person, per day. If the average (black, urban and rural) household has eight people, then the minimum amount needed is 24 000 litres per month per household.)

Grassroots opposition to privatisation has also contributed to both the failure and / or re-negotiation of many South African water privatisation projects.

It is within this context that APF and CAWP continue to intensify the campaign against privatisation of water in all its forms. It is through these campaigns that the majority has, once again, moved to the forefront of the drive to reclaim their basic human rights and dignity.

PLANTING THE SEEDS OF AN ALTERNATIVE

In South Africa, resistance to water privatisation continues to plant the seeds of an alternative. One of those seeds can be found in the ability of poor communities to undermine priva-

tised delivery, both politically and physically, at the point of “consumption”. Not only is this an act of self-empowerment, but also it provides a foundation on which the majority of South Africans can pursue the demands for policy and structural changes in the ownership and distribution of water and other basic services essential to life.

At present, these demands, which continue to be pursued by both APF and CAWP, include:

- The criminalisation of dissent and opposition to the privatisation of water must be immediately stopped;
- Pre-paid meters be outlawed immediately and removed from all poor communities where they have been installed. They should be replaced with an uncontrolled-volume, full-pressure water system, for which a flat-rate charge of R10 per month is levied;
- The government reverse its policy of privatising water and all other basic needs by cancelling all “service” contracts and “management” agreements with private water corporations;
- A policy of cross-subsidisation (from corporate business and wealthy individuals to poor communities) be immediately implemented in order to effectively subsidise the provision of free water services to the poor. This should be complemented by the government’s repudiation of apartheid debt and the use of subsequent monies to assist in delivering free basic services;
- The government make a firm political and fiscal commitment to rollout a universally accessible infrastructure (especially in the rural areas) that is completely divorced from any “cost-recovery” mechanism, and that is coupled with meaningful participation from popular, community organisations located in those areas most in need of infrastructure;
- The government publicly affirm the human and constitution-

al right of all South Africans to water by ensuring full public ownership, operation and management of public utilities in order to provide free basic services for all. Over time, such “public ownership” should take the form of public-community and public-worker partnerships in which community organisations and public sector workers have equal participation and democratic control.

INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

It is unfortunate that many progressive, international NGOs, social movements, political parties and community organisations continue to support the socio-economic policies of the ANC government in the mistaken belief that they are a genuine reflection of a “continuing national liberation struggle”. APF, CAWP and other allied organisations and movements in South Africa urge those who are part of the global justice and anti-capitalist globalisation movements to act in solidarity with us. The first act of such solidarity should be increased contact, sharing of information and the content / character of mutual struggles. Spreading the word about privatisation in South Africa, engaging in protest actions at South African embassies and consulates, and messages of solidarity would be welcome. The writing of political articles in both progressive and mainstream print media is also encouraged. Very crucial at this stage of the anti-privatisation movement in South Africa is the need for legal defence funds. It is difficult for APF and CAWP to provide funds to defend the many activists who are arrested and face court action and the intensification of the campaign will ensure that the need for legal defence funds is going to become even greater in the coming period.

Across the world, people have begun to unite in defence of the human right to water. Whether in Cochabamba, Bolivia or

Accra, Ghana or Atlanta, Georgia or Buenos Aires, Argentina or Manila in the Philippines, or Johannesburg, the ongoing anti-privatisation campaigns for water access are resonating with those in other places to decommodify water and institute public sector services in which genuine democratic participation and control is exercised in order to meet people’s needs.

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