

**Forum:** Environmental and Cultural Committee  
**Issue:** Water privatization conflicts  
**Student Officer:** Aleksandra Billeskov  
**Position:** Chair

## Introduction

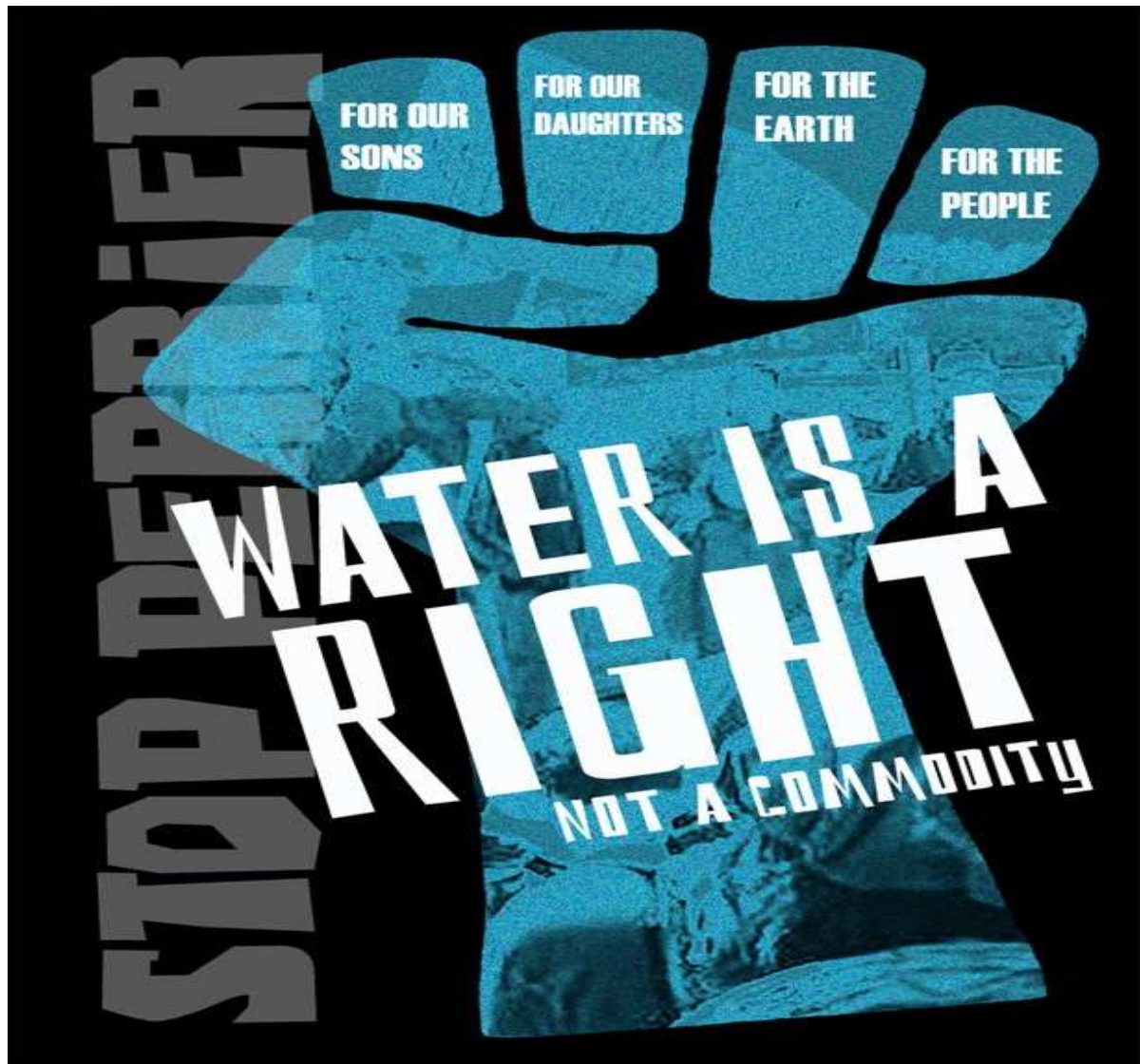
“The water crisis is the most pervasive, most severe, and most invisible dimension of the ecological devastation of the earth.” [*excerpted from the book “Water wars” by Vandana Shiva*]

Through the passage of time our world has undergone a vast amount of change and still is. As social preferences and customs change, so does the way we behave towards the environment and our - very often- indifferent behaviour has in turn brought about many environmental issues, which jeopardise our very existence. Population growth and climate change are only a few of the contributing factors which have led to a situation characterised by a lack of potable water around the world, the so called “water crisis”. And even though it seems as if we are slowly coming to terms with our responsibilities as far as environmental protection is concerned, a very important associated issue, that of water privatization and the conflicts it results in, still remains an unknown issue to some, and a controversial one for many others. Advocates of private sector participation in the provision of “water services” and sanitation base their opinion on the fact that such participation results in, amongst other things, an improvement in the efficiency and service quality of utilities. Opponents of water privatization however, counter-argue all points by highlighting the disadvantages of such an act, like the increase in tariff for example. An illustration of all points made by proponents can be found in the cases of the full water privatization in Chile, the mixed companies in Columbia and the cases of concession in Ecuador, Brazil and Argentina amongst others. With regard to the position held by opponents of water privatization, interesting cases in point are the cases of privatization in Bolivia, Tanzania and other countries.

## Definition of key terms

- Water privatization: The term “water privatization” officially refers to the process of transferring legal public sector “responsibility” of water resources (provision of water, sanitation) to the private sector which then is in charge of managing, producing, and dispersing the water as an economic good. Until the mid 20th century, water privatization was a rather unknown concept, which was officially introduced to many by Margaret Thatcher in 1989, when the entire British water system was privatized. There are various types of water privatization concepts, and motives for such an act vary from situation to situation.
- Conflict: “serious disagreement or argument” (Oxford Language Dictionary) and

“ incompatibility between opinion and principles” (Oxford Language Dictionary). In the case of water privatization, conflict does not refer to an armed conflict between nations, but to the strong disagreement between governments and their people, with regard to the way water is handled and treated as a business, for which people pay to have access to.



The poster “ Water is a right, not a commodity” was created and uploaded worldwide by the Council of Canadians, being a part of their campaign for the promotion of the official “Water Day”, the 22nd of March. [online picture available at : <http://rainsoftottawa.wordpress.com/2012/03/20/water-day-canada-2012/>]

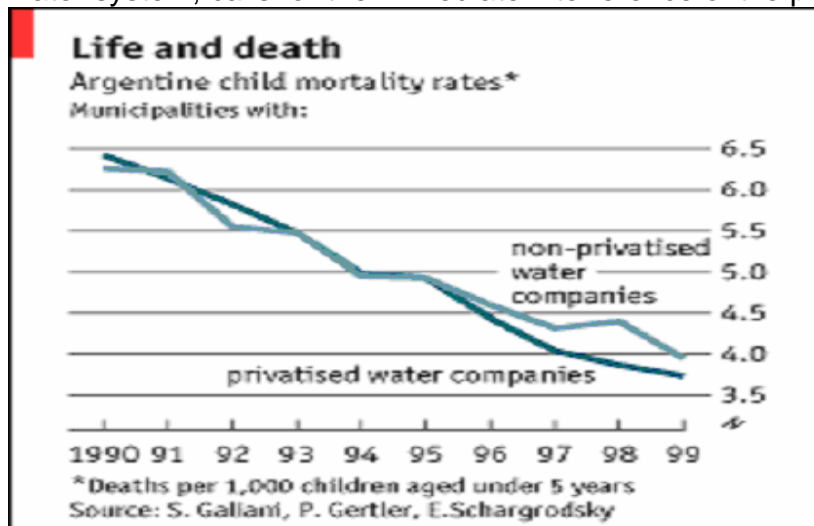
- Private sector: The private sector of a country’s economy is the sector that is composed of and “operated” by private groups or individuals for reasons of profits and can not be controlled by the state.

- Public sector: When using the term “ public sector” one refers to the part of a government, that is in charge of the production, sale , exchange and provision of goods by or for the government or the people.

## General Overview

As mentioned above, the question of water privatization and the conflicts it results in, is a somewhat controversial one with strong arguments both in favour and against it.

With regard to the advantages of water privatization, advocates support that such a privatization contributes greatly to the enhancement of water provision. Secondly it leads to increased investment in the area of water supply and widens access for both the public and the private sector. Furthermore proponents of water privatization argue that private companies can control and affect market forces in a better way than the public sector, which contributes to more reliable provision of water to the ones in need. Through the passage of time, it has been proved that free markets can supply demand in a better, cheaper, faster and more efficient way. In addition, a point that must be taken into consideration is that since private companies have a direct interest in the benefits of good water supply, they are more motivated than the public sector to perform in a better way. Furthermore, the involvement of private companies and their interests in water supply also increases funding, which is a key contributing factor to the improvement of water facilities and the condition of the water provided all around the world. Many experts argue that because of the severe water crisis our world faces, there is a need for immediate change and improvement of the system. But this much needed improvement can only be the result of innovation, which is a risk that only private companies and private investment are willing to take. Last but not least, proponents of water privatization highlight the fact that the insufficient work carried out by the public sector over the last few years with regard to maintaining and improving the water system, calls for the immediate interference of the private sector.



[online picture available at: <http://academic.evergreen.edu/g/grossmaz/VANOVEDR/>]

There are also however, strong arguments against the issue of water privatization. Opponents of water privatization support that the very focus of companies on profit

jeopardises the quality of water and in turn the interest of all individuals. Secondly, people against the interference of the private sector in water provision, claim that companies' interest in profit also results in the increase in rates and prices, as a means of maintaining a balance between financial income and outcome of companies. Furthermore anti- water privatization groups argue that the privatization of water is an obstacle in the enforcement of international trading agreements, which results in the weakening of the international system and in turn, the provision standards. Another point that must be taken into consideration is the fact that water privatization serves the interest of governments, because while they receive fees and assets through the "hiring" of the water supply by private companies, the people's interests are not served as they are called upon to pay more money for the services in general but also for the interest charged by the private suppliers of water. Furthermore the extent of research carried out by private companies in order to find additional resources raises serious concerns about the irreversible damage caused to the environment. In addition, people against privatization in the field of water claim that since water is essential to the very survival of mankind, governments should be at least partially involved in the process of its provision . Another point that must be taken into consideration in such a debate is that privatization also leads to an increase in tariff ( tax on the import or export of water) and this in turn turns "public good" into " private good". Last but not least, the ways in which people use water nowadays have changed over the past years, with the addition of new water utilities like swimming pools. And whereas private companies are only interested in the provision of water, governments should take over, as a means of ensuring access to water for all people, independent of socioeconomic background.

With regard to the effect of privatization on the environment there are two main opposing views. People in favour of privatization believe that the proper pricing of water will be equivalent to the costs of providing it, which in turn will also cover the environmental costs and will allow for more funding for its protection. If water is charged in accordance with consumption, consumers will be encouraged to use it more carefully and wisely, which will in turn reduce the possibilities of further environmental exploitation. People against water privatization however, claim that such an act will only further harm the environment, because companies will apply a policy of minimizing costs and maximizing profits. The minimisation of costs will be primarily achieved by the cut down in expenses that concern environmental protection. They conclude that water privatization will turn water and the environment in general into a "money machine", instead of something worth protecting.

In conclusion, water privatization conflicts refer to the strong disagreement of proponents and opponents of private sector interference in the provision of water. The main position of the side in favour is the promotion of both internal and external investment and the improvement in quality of services, whereas opponents base their opinion on the companies overt interest in profits over individual benefit and also draw attention to the environmental implications and problems that arise through water privatisation, which in turn jeopardise not only the quality of our life, but our actual existence.

## **Forms of privatization**

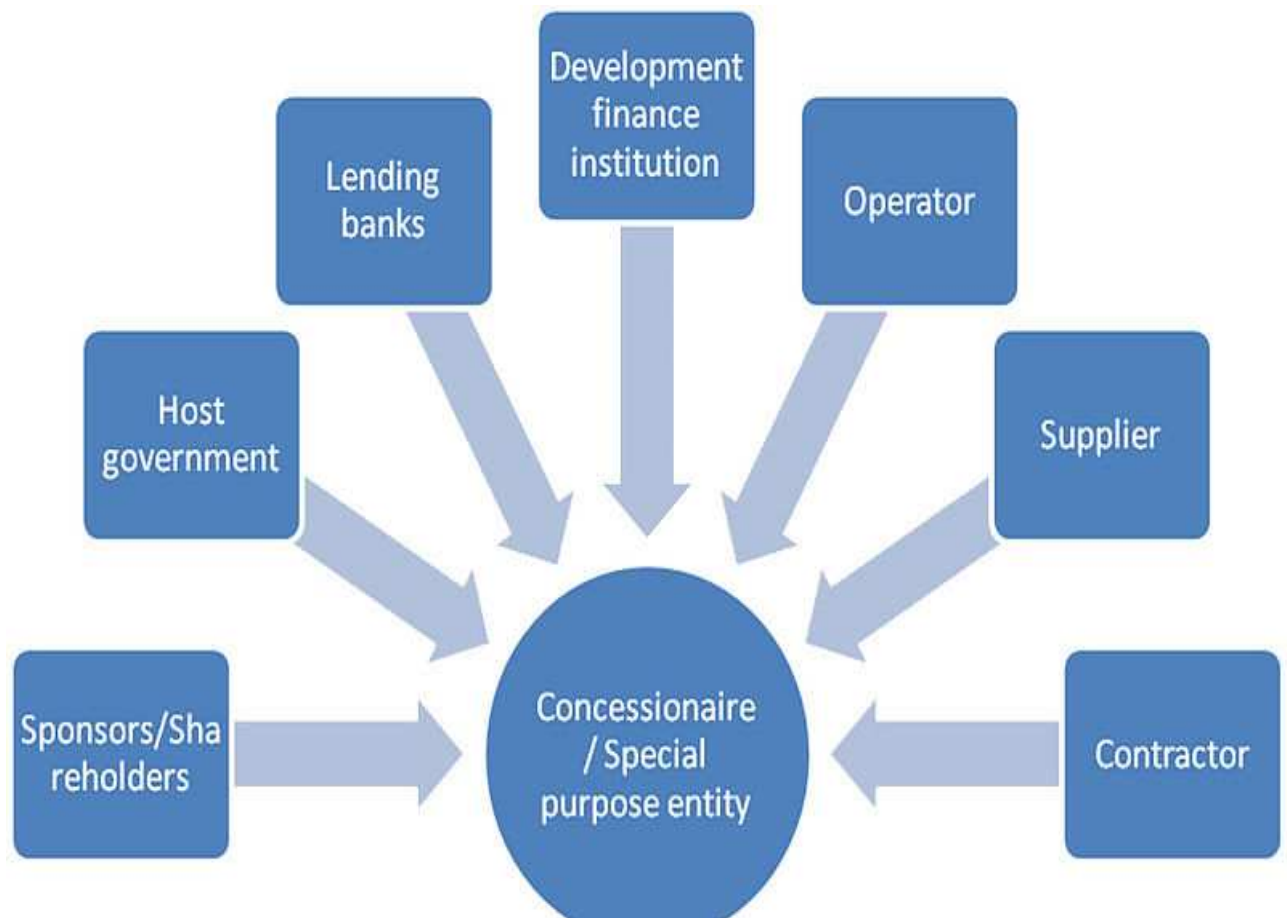
During the past 20 years there has been great development in the field of water privatization, which has resulted in the creation of new options with regard to privatization, which can cater to all needs and motives. Nowadays there are two forms of privatization.

- The first concept is the one of full water privatization. In such a case, after the deal, all water related possessions belong to the private sector investor and the government has no right of interference in the provision of water and no right of financial claim.
  
- There is also the concept of a “public-private partnership”. When such a partnership is enforced, then the public sector still has ownership of property and financial gain, yet the private company is in charge of certain functions for a very specific time period. Because of the importance of such an agreement, there are now three different forms of public- private-partnerships (PPPs) available.
  1. Management contract: When a management contract is signed, then the private sector must only run the system in exchange for a fee, of which the amount depends on their performance. Investment is financed by the public sector. Such a contract has duration of four to seven years.
  2. Lease contract: When referring to a lease contract, assets are leased to the private operator. However investment is still mainly or partially financed by the public sector. The duration of such a contract is 10 to 15 years. In the case of a lease contract, the concept of a “mixed ownership company” is also included, where the private sector has a minority share in the company of provision, but is in charge of full management.
  3. The last concept, included in PPPs is the one of concession. In such a case the private sector is responsible both for running the entire system and also financing the investment. Such a contract has a duration of 20- 30 years.

### **Further information on the concept of concession**

With regard to the enforcement of a concession agreement, countries have the right to chose between a BOT ( build-operate-transfer) agreement and a BOOT (build-own-operate-transfer).

- BOT( build-operate-transfer) constitutes a mean of project financing, where the private entity running the system is provided with the admission from either the public or private sector to design, construct and operate a facility, that is mentioned in their agreement. Parties involved in such a project are the host governments, the lenders, the private and public sector and there are also both political and technical risks attached , such as construction difficulties. Countries that enforce such agreements are Thailand, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Croatia, Iran and China among others.



[Information and online image available at: <http://www.mcmullan.net/eclj/BOT.html>]

- In the case of a BOOT (build-own-operate-transfer), the private entity owns everything that is accomplished until the moment of transfer to the public sector. During such a period, the private company operates the facility created, aiming at balancing the expenses of investment and maintenance. The advantages of such a system are the promotion of private investment and the injection of a new foreign “investment” into the country. Countries that have put BOOT agreements into effect are Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

To conclude, the most common form of “public- private- partnership” is the one of concession. One of the reasons why, is that it may reduce fiscal burden and widen access for both sectors. It is followed by management leases, which are adopted mainly in France, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Benin. Management contracts are used very often in Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Armenia, as they increase sufficiency and improve service quality. Last but not least, the concept of mixed ownerships can be found in countries, such as Spain, Columbia and Morocco.

### **History and current situation**

During the 19th century, the concept of water privatization was unknown. Water was provided everywhere by the public sector and was considered a “public and common”

good. However already from the 19th century (1820) six private companies in England were in charge of water provision. 33 years later the first French private water company, Compagnie Générale des Eaux was created and was followed in 1880 by a second one, Lyonnaise des Eaux. In 1989, Margaret Thatcher introduced the concept of water privatization, when the entire British water system was privatized. The fall of communism gradually ensured that all global powers emphasized the importance of free market policies and shortly afterwards water privatization conflicts became apparent. Recently, the World Bank published a report, estimating that over the last five years, about 270 million people, living in forty countries, both developed and developing, have had access to water through private companies. Nowadays in the United Kingdom, Wales, Chile, the Czech Republic, Armenia, Ivory Coast, Gabon and Senegal the entire population is provided with water by private companies, as is 50% of Hungary's population and a little less than 50% of the population of Algeria, Columbia, Germany, Italy, Malaysia, Mexico, Morocco, Poland and South Africa. The capital cities of the Philippines, Indonesia, Bulgaria, Estonia and Cuba are also provided with water by "private players". Countries that have no private water companies are Japan, Canada, Egypt, Pakistan and Scandinavian countries.

**UK:** The United Kingdom was the first country to run private water companies (6) in 1820. The companies lost their power during the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, but regained it during the 20th century, because of the widening of accessibility that took place. Margaret Thatcher privatized the entire system in 1989 and it has remained the same since.

**France:** Ever since the creation of private water companies in France in 1833 and 1880, there has been a co-existence of private and public management with the two largest water companies being the "Neolia Environment" and "Compagnie Generale des Faux".

**USA:** The United States of America provide 73 million people with water through private companies which have existed since the 19th century and apply Investor- owned, public-private partnerships.

**China:** Since 2001, China has adopted management, concession contracts and has also put into effect the concept of full privatization in some cases.

**Russia:** Russia maintains a functioning reservoir and distribution system from the Soviet Union, but has throughout the years faced multiple problems, because of an insufficient maintenance of pipes, which has exposed people to harmful diseases. Until the interference of the World Bank in 2002, local governments were in charge of water provision. However over the last ten years, local governments have co-operated with public investors, in order to raise money for the reconstruction of all water supply related properties.

**Germany:** Germany is one of the countries that introduced the water privatization concept for fiscal reasons. In 1999, Berlin sold 49.9% of its utility shares in exchange for a profit that reached 1.69 bn Euro. Nowadays, Germany applies mixed ownership contracts.

During the late 1990s and the first decade of the 20th century, more countries have developed an interest in water privatization companies. Such countries are Hungary, Romania, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Indonesia, South Africa, Gabon, Senegal, Mexico, Armenia, Saudi Arabia and Cuba.

## Major parties involved

### World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF)

[The International Monetary Fund is an international organisation, whose stated aim is to stabilize exchange rates and contribute to the reconstruction of the international payment system. (<http://www.imf.org/external/about/ourwork.htm>)

The World Bank is an international financial institution, which provides loans to developing countries for programmes aiming at the improvement of their infrastructure. (<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTABOUTUS/0..contentMDK:20103838~menuPK:1696997~pagePK:51123644~piPK:329829~theSitePK:29708,00.html>)]

Since the 1990's the IMF and the World Bank have been eager to promote water privatization. They accomplish this privatization through structural adjustment programmes ( policy applied by the IMF and WB in developing countries). In these programmes/ loans there are clauses, very often water privatization related ones, that must be put in effect in order for the country to receive help or obtain a lower interest rate. Examples of such agreements are the cases of privatization in Bolivia, Ghana and Chile.

*(The data and statistic is provided by the IMF)*

**Banks and Development Corporations:** Major parties involved in water privatization and in turn in water privatization conflicts are banks and development corporations, which encourage funding and support the private companies during the "private period".

## Case study

As mentioned above, water privatization is a somewhat controversial issue. Proponents of such privatization point out its advantages and success in the cases of privatization in Ecuador and Colombia (and others), whereas opponents draw our attention to the cases of Bolivia and Tanzania. Lastly there are also some cases that could be interpreted as being in favour of both views, such as the privatization in Argentina and the United Kingdom.

### Privatization in Ecuador

Seventeen years ago, the Ecuadorian government decided to privatize the drinking water supply in the country's largest city, Guayaquil with the aid of a concession agreement. A year later, in 1996, after all water pipes were merged, the phase of modernisation and updating of all pipes took place and soon after that, the situation was greatly improved. In 2001, the government signed a 30 year long concession with two specific terms. The tariff would remain constant for the first five years and people with no access to water, would gradually gain access without any further cost. Public

agencies cooperated with the private company and very soon the benefits of this privatization became obvious. People in the city went from a 2-4 hours service per day to a 24 hours service system and 55.000 families gained access to water within less than a year. The condition of the provided water was greatly improved and employment increased. A recent comparison between the water provided by private and public agencies in Ecuador concluded that the quality of the water provided by public agencies was worse and that less people had access to water. There are still challenges to face in Ecuador, however the measures that have been taken so far have led to great improvement. To conclude, many people say that one of the contributing factors to this programmes' success was the fact that the government managed to control the tariff (extra fee), which under other circumstances would have risen very high and become one of the disadvantages of water privatization, causing people's disappointment and financial hardship.

### **Privatization in Cochabamba, Bolivia**

During the time period 1993-1997 the Bolivian government put many measures into effect, in order to develop a neoliberal economic policy, with water privatization constituting one of its key elements. In 1999, after the efforts of the World Bank and the IMF to persuade the government that water privatization had to take place “ in exchange” for the organizations help and involvement in the improvement of the Bolivian infrastructure, the government sold the water supply system. Twelve years ago (2000), during February and March, the city of Cochabamba in Bolivia went through civil unrest. People took to the streets and strongly protested against the privatization of Bolivia's water system, as they watched the price of water triple or quadruple within a period of only three weeks. Unable to survive under the burden of the new water prices, people continued to protest, while in April a teenager was shot during demonstrations and many other people were injured or detained. Five years later, in 2005, after a serious second round of demonstrations, the two concession agreements were terminated, however the problems that had arisen over that time worried the International Community. Because of the rise in tariffs, poverty increased by 2% and the government was then faced with accounting for errors, water shortages and poor crisis management. The case of the failed privatization in Bolivia is an example and reminder to all countries of the importance of balancing tariffs with governmental presence and inspection.

### **UN and International Community interference and actions**

***“ Some privatization programs have produced positive results. But the overall record is not encouraging. From Argentina to Bolivia, and from the Philippines to the United States, the conviction that the private sector offers a “magic bullet” for unleashing the equity and efficiency needed to accelerate progress towards water for all has proven to be misplaced. While these past failures of water concessions do not provide evidence that the private sector has no role to play, they do point to the need for greater caution, regulation and a commitment to equity in public-private partnership.”*** United Nations Human Development Report

Over the past ten years, great concern has been raised about the course that our environment has taken and attention has been drawn to the insufficient amount of potable water. Perceived by many as an answer to this problem, water privatization has been discussed in various international meetings, including these under the supervision of the United Nations. However no resolution has been passed and no treaty has been signed yet, as the International Community is still examining the advantages and disadvantages. It is a widely held belief though that the water sector has long been a monopoly and that for developing countries to develop sufficiently, public financing is a necessity.

## Possible Solutions

The question of water privatization is one that very often results in disagreements and conflict, because of the arguments and positions opposing nature. However there are some points that must be taken into consideration no matter what ones policy is and these are the importance of environmental protection and the priority of the individual over profit.

Countries in favour of water privatizations, such as the United Kingdom, Brazil, Spain and France should work hard in order to prepare a resolution, which will provide all with a solution to as many water privatization disadvantages as possible. Points that must be considered by countries with such a policy is the determination of a maximum tariff, the creation of a water utility inspecting body, inspecting both the public and private sector, the expansion of water pipes in order to reach people with no access to water and expensive water bills. Lastly it is important to come up with ideas to eliminate corruption in private companies and ensure access to water in Sub-Saharan countries.

Countries against water privatizations or ones affected negatively by them, must on the other hand be constructive and come up with ways in which the public sector can be empowered and problems that have arisen from privatization can be dealt with. It is important to ensure the fairness of water bills, transparency of the system, to encourage new connections and improvement of the old ones and to come up with ideas for the funding of projects.

Lastly, it is vital to remember that water is the most essential element of our life and the protection of both water and our environment is an issue which concerns all.

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