



Manifesto “Water is a right - not a business!” Forum against Water Grabbing

On October 19 and 20, 2018, representatives of social movements, NGOs, trade unions and church grassroots organizations as well as many interested individuals met in Bern and intensively discussed water-grabbing. By water-grabbing we mean the appropriation and control of water by powerful actors. We shared with international guests knowledge and experiences of exploitation mechanisms gained from resistance movements and struggles we have experienced. A common space of solidarity emerged from the conviction that the fight to defend water as a human right is a common one in which we mutually support one another.

Five aspects of water-grabbing

“I was violently evicted because of the mine. Drinking water is not always available at the place I was taken to, we only receive water every two weeks and many of us have to buy drinking water every day.” (Samuel Arregoces, a person affected by the El Cerrejón coal mine in Colombia)

The following aspects of water-grabbing were intensively examined and discussed at the forum in panel discussions, workshops and at a World Café:

- Large-scale **extraction of raw materials**, as at the El Cerrejón open-cast coal mine (Colombia), has a massive impact on the water balance. The population has lost free access to rivers, streams and springs. The water supply is extremely precarious and resettled communities are dependent on the coal mine’s water tanks. Tributaries of the River Ranchería have been diverted, are dried up or polluted with heavy metals. The consequences are health problems and malnutrition, which can be fatal, particularly for children.
- Industrial agriculture – **agribusiness** – consumes a lot of water, which is no longer available to the population. The situation is compounded by the use of pesticides and herbicides. These toxic substances – produced by the Swiss group Syngenta, among others – find their way into the groundwater, streams and rivers. This gives rise to serious health problems for the local population, who need the water for drinking, cooking and washing themselves and their clothes. Smallholder families and fishermen and women are losing their livelihoods; poverty and emigration are the direct consequences.
- **Dams** are praised as green-energy producers. Thousands of mega-dams are in the planning stage or under construction around the world. Thousands of people are being forced out of their homes by flooding, while ecologically and culturally valuable areas are destroyed forever. Meanwhile, the population in the lower reaches is suffering from water shortages and losing its livelihoods, while fish stocks are being depleted.
- While water shortages are becoming increasingly acute in many places, private corporate groups are pumping out groundwater to sell it in **bottles** for profit. The Swiss food multinational Nestlé is right up among the leaders here. In São Lourenço, Brazil, for example, two important mineral water springs are drying up and in Vittel the population obtains its water from tank trucks in the summer, while Nestlé continues to pump out water and the groundwater level drops.
- One aim of **privatization of water supplies** is that corporate groups secure control of water and make a profit from selling it. As was clearly shown at the Forum, privatizations usually lead to a deterioration in the water supply, while making it more expensive.

Background to, and consequences of, water-grabbing

Transnational corporations around the world are gaining ever greater control of water – from groundwater through surface water to the water tap – by means of privatization, concessions and marketing. Such control serves to protect the interests of agribusiness, the electricity and mining industries and ensures **lucrative profits**. The corporate groups can rely on the complicity of governments and international organizations: A network of free-trade and investment-protection treaties **protects their interests** and, due to corruption in governments, they benefit locally from **impunity** - even in the case of violations of the human right to water.

This is leading to an **increase in water conflicts**, particularly in the **Global South**. Countries in the Global South are increasingly being downgraded to commodity suppliers, as in colonial times. An enormous quantity of “virtual water” – which is needed during processing of the raw materials – goes into the processed raw materials and goods consumed. This water consumption remains invisible in the water footprint of the Global North. In the Global South, gigantic mining projects, agribusiness and industry are diverting water, dams are flooding entire areas of the upper reaches of rivers and reducing rivers in the lower reaches to a trickle. Water is no longer accessible to the local population or cannot be drunk due to pollution. The impacts on ecosystems and the people whose lives are based on these ecosystems are devastating: displacement, loss of livelihoods, health problems, forced migration, etc. Privatization of water supplies and the pumping out and bottling of groundwater also sometimes restrict people’s access to clean drinking water to a serious extent.

Water shortages and global warming are closely interlinked. Desertification is under way in many countries and frequently in regions where water is extracted from its natural cycle and used for the export industry. At the same time, mining, agribusiness and dams are contributing to climate change as forests are chopped down or flooded.

The **victims of water-grabbing** are primarily socially and economically disadvantaged sections of the population, particularly in Latin America and Africa. The worst-affected people are women, indigenous communities, migrants and refugees, smallholder farmers and inhabitants of the peripheral urban areas.

Securing water resources for corporate interests and profit while at the same time failing to secure access to water for the local population violates the human right to water. Resistance to water-grabbing is growing in many places in the Global South, but also in the USA, Canada and Europe.

People in the Global South who defend themselves against mining and dam projects, defend their land against the advance of agribusiness or denounce the machinations of corporate groups are exposed to criminalization and violence or even murder. These activists desperately need international solidarity and support.

The fight to defend water – possible actions and demands

We, who have participated in the “Forum against Water-Grabbing”, **express our solidarity** with the struggles of social movements around the world to defend water. We reject the commoditization, marketing and control of water by private corporate groups. Water is a human right, it belongs to the general public and must be managed democratically. We support processes in which the population takes (back) control and management of water in order to secure access to water for everybody and ensures that there is no room for private profit interests.

We are extremely concerned about the rise in authoritarianism, fascist movements and marginalization worldwide. We vehemently reject this trend, which goes hand in hand with an attack on the human rights of population groups, including the human right to water.

The economic growth model is not compatible with the right to water for all people worldwide, but exacerbates the water crisis. This model must therefore be discarded. In its place, an alternative development model that overcomes the unequal distribution between North and South must be

devised in a participatory, democratic way. In doing so, the needs of the population - instead of those of corporate groups - must be at the centre of attention.

Populations, including in particular indigenous and farming communities, must have the right to participate in decisions concerning mining projects, projected dams, waterway diversions and the extension of agribusiness that concern them; their decision must be fully respected.

Trade must be subject to democratic control. Companies should no longer have the right to sue countries; instead, mechanisms must be established, both at the international level and in countries where corporate groups have their headquarters, so that affected populations can hold corporate groups accountable for violations of their rights. We welcome the efforts of the Stop Corporate Impunity campaign and of the Treaty Alliance to obtain a treaty to this effect within the UN, as well as the Corporate Responsibility initiative in Switzerland.

Corporate groups and States must take appropriate responsibility for the damage and losses that have been caused by dams, mining and agribusiness, inter alia. They include in particular displacement, loss of livelihoods, cultural heritage and biodiversity. Those affected must be recognized as such and appropriate reparations must be made.

Criminalization and violence against environmental activists must stop. Switzerland must stand up to ensure that such violence stops and those responsible are prosecuted under criminal law. At the very least, political and economic sanctions must be imposed on the countries concerned.

Small-scale, ecological agriculture that cares about the environment and water must be promoted, instead of agribusiness; because it is small-scale agriculture that grows the food for the majority of the world's population.

Water must not be used as a political weapon, but is a medium for peace.

The following demands to individual addressees were collected at the Forum against Water-Grabbing. They do not claim to be exhaustive.

Demands to Switzerland and its institutions

We demand that Switzerland make the case for the implementation of an effective, binding UN treaty on transnational corporate groups.

The cooperation between SDC (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation) and the Water Resources Group helps corporate groups to assert their interests in the water sector. We therefore demand that this cooperation be terminated.

We demand that Switzerland increasingly support public-public partnerships so that local authorities in the Global South can establish an efficient water supply that serves the whole population.

We demand that Switzerland actively support remunicipalization efforts and share its expertise on public water supplies. International trade agreements which explicitly exclude remunicipalization, for example TISA, must be combated.

We demand a far-reaching ban on pesticides in Switzerland. Pesticides prohibited in Switzerland (for example, those made by Syngenta) must no longer be allowed to be exported.

We demand that Switzerland take measures to significantly reduce its water footprint.

We demand that public institutions guarantee free access to tap water at stations and in public places and make a declaration to this effect.

We demand that state schools include and examine critically the subject of water, its commercial utilization and the consequences thereof in the curriculum and in everyday school life.

We demand that public institutions and associations, as well as restaurants and cafés, provide pitchers and decanters with tap water and charge no more than the price of service.

Demands to corporate groups headquartered in Switzerland

We demand that corporate groups headquartered in Switzerland respect the human right to water all over the world.

We demand that banks, pension funds and reinsurers withdraw from agro-industry, mining and dam projects that have damaging effects.

We demand that the affected communities be given direct access to the data collected on the quality of water, air and soil around mines wholly or partially owned by Swiss corporate groups.

We demand that the communities affected by the El Cerrejón mine in Colombia be given the right to participate in the negotiations.

Demands to the Colombian government

We demand that the communities in the south of La Guajira have free access to good-quality drinking water and that it be directly and continuously available.

Demand to the population of Switzerland

We call on the population to exercise its right to political participation and to make the case for water as a public good in Switzerland and internationally.

