For thousands of years legal systems have accepted that running water cannot be owned. Even in the industrialized West, up until recently, water was a shared resource. Public utilities were set up in the industrialized world to install complex water delivery and sewage treatment systems. People in the First World were expected to pay for the delivery of their water, the upkeep of the system and the building of reservoirs and other water storage systems, but the water remained a shared resource. Over the past half century, as the world population has increased and water has become increasingly scarce, it has become far less a shared resource. By the 1970s international organizations such as the United Nations, UNICEF, World Health Organization and the UN Development Plan began to highlight the plight of the poor in the third world. By 2003 more than a billion people, a quarter of the world’s population, had no access to safe drinking water.

Every year more than five million people (mostly children) die from water-borne diseases such as dysentery and diarrhea. Global water consumption is now doubling every twenty years, more than twice the rate of population growth. The UN is now predicting that water will become even scarcer, and global per capita water availability could decline by a third during the next twenty years. The poor in the Third World, who are already suffering from lack of water, will be the worst affected. Water Privatization In 1989 Margaret Thatcher carried out a huge water privatization scheme for the whole of England and Wales. Suddenly a precious natural shared resource was taken from the British people, sold off and privatized. The British people now had to pay the water companies, not just to provide water, but also to make a profit for their shareholders and to pay huge management salaries. Water bills doubled in less than a decade, causing hardship in many parts of the UK. There were 50,000 disconnections during this period and water quality steadily deteriorated.

By 1990 international water companies operated in 12 countries, and between 1994 and 1998 there were 139 water-related deals. In most parts of the First World, however, governments continued to safeguard their water resources and to provide a public service for their people. As a consequence global water companies, who wanted to buy up these public utilities, began to form partnerships with international financial institutions in order to reduce the role that traditional governments played in water provision. The first two of these partnerships, the Global Water Partnership (GWP) and the World Water Council (WWC), were formed in 1996 with Ismail Serageldin, the World Bank Vice-President and chair of the WWC. Once these partnerships had been formed, water companies could now negotiate and collaborate with multilateral banks and the United Nations. The World Water Council held its first meeting, the World Water Forum, in Marrakesh in 1997. In 1998, the World Water Council created the World Water Commission that included all the major water corporations and the CEO of the World Bank/UN Global Environment Facility, Mohamed T. El-Ashry. The commission called for full deregulation of the water sector and recommended that transnational corporations should take over the provision of water worldwide. By the year 2000, private water corporations operated in 100 countries and 10% of the world’s water was privatized. In 2000 the World Bank, the UN and some of the largest water corporations met at the second World Water Forum, in Den Haag, Netherlands. They decided to accelerate global water privatizations. Fortune Magazine predicted, in May 2000, that water was about to become “one of the world’s biggest business opportunities.” Ever since they began to collaborate with the World Bank, transnational water corporations have attempted to wield greater influence over individual countries. A series of trade agreements have all increased the power of the transnational water companies. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and various World Trade Organization (WTO)
agreements all gave transnational water corporations access to the water of the countries that had signed these agreements. Governments all over the world literally signed away their right to control their own country’s water supplies. The two biggest water corporations, Suez and Vivendi, now provide water for 230 million people, 7% of the world’s population, mostly in Europe. In the US, 85% of households still get their water from public utilities, but the water corporations are putting pressure on Congress by lobbying for laws that will protect them from lawsuits over contaminated water. This legislation will make it easier for the water corporations to take over water provision. The British parliament has already passed a law providing UK water companies with indemnity against lawsuits brought against them by the public. Water Privatization in the Third World The World Bank and the IMF are now putting pressure on Third World countries to sell off their water to multinational corporations in order to reduce their national debt. Together with international development organizations they have been promoting the idea that the only way to provide water in the Third World is through the private sector. Third world countries have huge national debts that they struggle to pay, so in many cases the IMF has made further loans to these countries on condition that they conform to structural adjustment programs, including the privatization of their water supplies. As in the global North, water privatization causes increased costs that the poorest people in the world cannot afford to pay. As a result of this process in the poorest parts of the world, people (mainly women) are forced to walk further and further in search of water which has not been privatized and which is often neither safe nor clean. In some cases people have to choose between buying water and buying food. In Ghana today, since water privatization, the cost of water has doubled, meaning that families lucky enough to have running water must now pay a quarter of their income for the privilege, while a bucket of water can cost up to a tenth of most people’s daily earnings.

Water wars
In Cochabamba, Bolivia, water rates increased by 35% after the water company Bechtel bought the city’s water in 1999. The citizens of Cochabamba were so incensed that they marched, protested and rioted, until the Bolivian government eventually voided Bechtel’s contract. There have been similar protests against water privatization in Paraguay, Panama, Brazil, Peru, Colombia, India, Pakistan, Hungary and South Africa. In 1979 Anwar Sadat said, “The only matter that could take Egypt to war again is water,” a threat that was directed at Ethiopia. King Hussein of Jordan made a similar statement that year as a threat directed towards Israel. In the 1980s, US government intelligence estimated ten places where water wars could break out: Jordan, Israel, Cyprus, Malta, the Arabian Peninsula, Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and the Yemen. More than 200 major river systems cross international borders. In 1999 Gaddafi warned that the “next Middle East war would be over dwindling water supplies.” Other people say that past and present Middle East conflicts have always been over water. Water scarcity in the Middle East is already critical. Four and a half percent of the world’s population lives in the area, which contains half the world’s oil, 2% of the world’s rainfall and 0.4% of the world’s recoverable water supplies. It is one of the world’s most water-stressed regions with deteriorating quality and dwindling water supplies. The Arab per capita water supply is expected to drop by half by the year 2030.

Damming the world
Damming transnational rivers often contravenes international law, especially when countries upstream take more than their fair share of water from countries downstream. Yet the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank have promoted the building of large numbers of gigantic dams throughout Asia. These dams displace millions of people who live in the areas to be flooded, while depriving people downstream of the water the rivers once provided.

Israel
Israel gets two thirds of its water from territories that it has invaded: the Golan Heights and the West Bank. It
takes water from the Jordan and stores it in the Sea of Galilee in contravention of international law, which states that water should not be diverted from its catchment basin. This water is then transported to Israel’s cities, farms and industries. The river Jordan flows from the Golan Heights in Syria and from the Lebanon, through Jordan, Israel and Palestine. In 1949 Israel began taking water from the Golan Heights and in 1951 invaded, driving out the villagers and ignoring UN Truce Supervision protests. In 1953 the Eisenhower Administration prepared a unified plan for the use of the Jordan River, granting 33% of its use to Israel. But Israel wanted more than that, so in September 1953 Israel began secretly constructing a pipeline to divert Jordan’s water resources from the Golan Heights in defiance of the US. The US soon found out and applied sanctions. Israel suspended work on the pipeline briefly until US aid was resumed, and then continued to work on the diversion project, which was soon completed. Syria and Jordan protested against Israel’s appropriation of their water, and the PLO attacked the pipeline. Israel subsequently ignored several UN Security Council Resolutions and occupied the Golan Heights in 1967. In 1982 Israel invaded Lebanon and took control of the Hasbani and Wazzani rivers, which flow into the Jordan, as well as the Litani River. A quarter of Israel’s remaining water comes from underground reservoirs in the West Bank, which Israel occupied in 1967, a resource that supplies 30% of the capital’s households in Tel Aviv. Israel uses 17% more than the 1.9 billion cubic meters of water it obtains from renewable sources, therefore causing the water table level to drop. In 1994 Jordan and Israel signed a peace treaty in which Israel agreed to share the water from the river Jordan with Jordan, but in 1999 Israel cut Jordan’s supply by 60% owing to a drought across the region. The 1997 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses states clearly how these waters are to be shared equitably and reasonably. The Palestinian people thus have the right to an equitable and reasonable share of the international watercourses situated in their land. They do not, at present, enjoy this right. Israel’s severe restriction on Palestine’s use of water in agriculture severely limits their ability to grow food.

India
India and Bangladesh have been quarrelling for twenty years over rights to extract water from the Ganges.

Egypt
Egypt is totally dependent on the Nile for water usage. For the past twenty years Egypt has been diverting water from the Nile into land reclamation projects in the Sinai desert, a contravention of international law since the Nile flows through Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and Zaire. The waters of the Nile should therefore be shared equitably and reasonably among all these countries and not be diverted outside its catchment basin. In 1996 President Mubarak announced that he planned to divert water from the Nile under the Suez Canal into the North Sinai desert, east of the Suez Canal and 40 kilometers from the Gaza Strip. Many believe that this water will eventually end up in Israel. 86% of the Nile water comes from Ethiopia, which desperately needs to develop water projects in order to grow food for its own people, so Ethiopia is fiercely opposed to Egypt’s Nile diversion project. The Sudan threatened to cut Egypt’s water quota, whilst all the other countries that border the Nile are opposed to the project, which is viewed as a direct violation of international law. Ironically, North Sinai has plenty of underground water and rainfall would be sufficient, if it were harvested, to support as many as a million people in the area.

Turkey
Turkey signed a treaty with Israel in 2004 to ship 50 million cubic meters of water a year, for 20 years, from the river Manavgat in Anatolia in return for arms from Israel. Turkey is building dams on the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, which flow through Syria and Iraq. This is called the Grand Anatolian Project and includes a vast irrigation scheme with seven dams on the Euphrates, six dams on the Tigris, and a giant dam called the Ataturk, which will deprive Syria and Iraq of most of the flow of the Euphrates. With Israel already appropriating water
from the river Jordan and the Golan Heights, Syria will be seriously short of water once Turkey’s Grand Anatolian Project is completed.

**China and the Mekong**

Six countries depend on the Mekong River for food, water and transport. The Mekong rises in Tibet, flows through China’s Yunnan province, then through Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The Manwan Dam, built by China in 1996, has resulted in shallower river levels and flash floods. China is now building six more dams, causing the countries downstream to be afraid that this will have a deleterious effect along the river. None of these Chinese dams have been assessed for their social or ecological impacts on the downstream countries. In 2003 the Asian Development Bank recommended building a $43 billion electricity generation system, including major dams in Laos, China, Burma and Cambodia. The Mekong could become one of the most dammed rivers in the world with more than 100 other major dams, diversions and irrigation projects. It is hard to imagine how Vietnam, the last country the Mekong flows through, will survive if all these projects are carried out. The dams planned for Laos will displace 5,700 people, impoverish 120,000 more, and saddle the country with enormous debts. All the electricity produced by the dam will go to Thailand, and thousands of indigenous people have already been dispossessed by the building of smaller dams in Laos.

**Water must be shared**

Water is a part of the earth’s heritage that must be preserved for future generations and protected in the public domain by local, national and international law. We cannot continue to abuse the world’s precious water resources when access to clean water for basic needs is a fundamental human right. International cooperation over sources of freshwater is possible, practicable and protected in principle by existing international legislation that enshrines the principle of equitable and reasonable sharing of water resources. Privatization has resulted in a less efficient distribution of water supplies to those most in need, proving that a return to the principle of sharing this vital resource is both possible and essential.

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