

World Water Commission recommends privatisation of water supplies

Paul Mitchell
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Over 1 billion people drink unsafe water, 2.3 billion have no sanitation and seven million die world-wide from water-related diseases each year. These terrible figures are presented by the World Water Commission for the 21st Century in its report to the Second World Water Forum (WWF) in the Netherlands on March 17-23. The event is part of World Water Week.

The Commission report, *A Water Secure Future: Vision for Water, Life and the Environment*, is based on its “World Water Vision”: “Every human being should have access to safe water for drinking, appropriate sanitation and enough food and energy at reasonable cost. Providing adequate water to meet these basic needs must be done in a manner that works in harmony with nature.”

Press releases launching the Vision say the Commission is an independent body that has reached its conclusions after months of global consultations. They concentrate on the contributions by youth forums, women's representatives and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). According to William Cosgrove of the Vision Management Unit, the project is “not an academic exercise—it is the start of a movement.... The main actors will be individuals and groups in households and communities with new responsibilities for using water services”.

However, it transpires that the “vision” can only be implemented by the wholesale privatisation of water supply and sanitation services across the world. By focusing on the present crisis in water supply, the Commission hope to force through “immediate changes in institutional arrangements”—the code words for privatisation.

The WWF and the Commission's proposals are the latest attempts by Western governments and business interests to end any concept of a universal right to water

and sanitation and replace it with the free market concept of water as a commodity.

“Global experience shows that money is the medium of accountability,” says the Commission. It looks to the \$250 billion of private capital invested in developing countries over the last eight years, of which hardly any has gone to those involved in the water supply or sanitation sector. Now they want their slice of the cake.

In order to create the conditions for private capital, the Commission says consumers must pay the full cost price of water. Governments must stop subsidies and limit themselves to “enabling” a stable political and economic environment for the private sector to provide piped supplies.

Because the poor cannot afford piped supply, governments must treat them as welfare recipients, the Commission suggests, perhaps issuing “water stamps” as happens in Chile. Alternatively, community organisations and NGOs should organise “appropriate” levels of service—usually labour intensive schemes in which the poor collect rainwater and dig their own sewers.

To encourage the poorer countries to accept this second class service, the Commission portrays itself as a champion of the poor against the rich. It says the urban rich, middle class and working class have piped water supplies that are subsidised (“siphoned off by the rich” in their emotive words) whilst the poor have to buy water from expensive street vendors. The Commission says the poor should pressure governments to end subsidies, particularly the agricultural subsidies to farmers in the West, claiming this will allow poorer farmers access to their markets. There is no talk of the poor demanding their right to high quality piped supplies.

In its report the Commission is presented as an

independent body composed of personalities of international stature. A look at the history of the Commission shows it is far from independent.

It was set up in August 1998 by the World Water Council, organisers of the Forum, to draw up the Vision. Its chairman is Ismail Serageldin, a vice president at the World Bank. Other notables include former heads of state such as Mikhail Gorbachev and financial or business figures such as Jérôme Monod, chairman of the French water company, Suez Lyonnaise des Eaux.

The World Water Council was created in 1995 by the United Nations and the World Bank. It is an unelected body whose publication *World Water Vision: Making Water Everybody's Business* forms the basis of the Commission's report.

In the same year the Global Water Partnership was created. It carries out the day-to-day work of the Council, funded by the foreign and aid ministries of European countries and Canada, the Ford Foundation, the UN Development Programme and the World Bank. The Partnership is responsible for *Framework for Action*, which contains the privatisation proposals.

The Commission report is full of obvious anomalies. It says that improved water supply and sanitation services in the nineteenth and the twentieth century had a revolutionary impact on health, but fails to mention that these were carried out by public bodies—precisely because the private sector had ignored them. Throughout the report it continually equates public bodies with corruption and inefficiency, whilst private companies are assumed to be unblemished.

The report claims privatisation will free up subsidies that can be targeted for the poor, but then says, “the level and breadth of subsidies will obviously need to take account of the overall level of resource availability to governments in different settings”. The reality is that governments, many of which do not provide social benefits in the first place, will be under pressure to cut whatever money becomes available.

Despite claiming that “central is the idea of participation”, only two paragraphs in the 70-page document deal with this subject. It is clear that only certain types of participants have influenced the commissioners; the “increasing number of political leaders ... who have taken the courageous steps necessary for reforms. It is from their reforms that most

of the lessons in this Report are drawn”.

In many ways the WWF parallels the recent World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle. Limited public consultation is carried out, whilst the solutions are worked out behind locked doors between Western governments and businesses. The Forum merely rubberstamps these solutions. Ministers attending a special conference at the Forum and business organisations then signal their intention to climb on board—after formulating the proposals in the first place. In case any of the developing countries have second thoughts, the Commission advises international agencies to concentrate their aid on those countries that implement the reforms.

The planning of water supply and sanitation on a global scale would be a progressive step, but even the limited proposals for integrated water resource management—the management of river networks across national boundaries—are an unrealisable dream under the Commission's proposals. The Commission concedes, “It is remarkable that even the limited and relatively weak UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Waters has taken 20 years to negotiate and is still at risk of not being ratified.”

The experience of the last two decades of economic restructuring programmes dictated by the banks and Western governments has seen falling living standards for the mass of people around the world. Their application to water supply and sanitation will accelerate the process of impoverishment.



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