

A blue and just future is possible

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A BLUE AND JUST FUTURE IS POSSIBLE

Maude BARLOW

photo Wolfgang Schmidt

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This coming human crisis is mirrored and made worse by an ecological crisis. The planet is running out of clean water. We are exploiting our rivers to death and most major rivers no longer reach the sea. Since 1990, over half the major rivers in China have disappeared. As well, we are over-pumping groundwater so relentlessly that aquifers are not being replenished. Using new satellite technology, NASA reports that a third of the planet's 37 major aquifers are being sucked dry. The Arabian Aquifer System, a key water source for 60 million people is the world's most overstressed. Other threatened aquifers are the Indus Basin aquifer in northwestern India and Pakistan and the Central Valley aquifer in California. Dramatic action is needed to deal with the twin ecological and human water crises coming at us full speed. I pose to you today three hard facts that I believe if we do not face, we will not be successful in solving these crises.

First, the human crisis cannot be solved without dealing with the ecological crisis and that means re-imagining our understanding of climate change. Climate chaos is not just a result of runaway fossil fuel emissions. We only have the problem half identified.

Major bodies of water have been destroyed from over extraction and water diversion, not climate change as we usually describe it. The destruction of watersheds and water-retentive land is causing rapidly growing desertification, which in turn, warms the planet. As well, the razing of forests devastates hydrologic cycles. The crisis in Sao Paulo is not due to greenhouse gas emissions but to the destruction of the Amazon, the biotic pump that creates "flying rivers" that carry rain thousands of kilometres and acts as a air conditioner, cooling the atmosphere. Scientists say the razing of the Amazon may be partially responsible for drought as far away as California and Texas.

And the solution to climate chaos lies not just with reducing our use of fossil fuels but with protection and restoration of watersheds, thereby returning local water cycles to health, the reclamation of carbon to heal and regenerate soil and the protection and re-building of forests. Miraculous projects around the world are greening deserts, restoring watersheds and aquifers and re-building healthy soil, thereby creating biodiversity for a living planet.

Second, the human right to water and sanitation and protection of the most vulnerable must be put at the heart of all plans dealing with water. Five and a half years ago, the United Nations General Assembly voted to adopt a resolution guaranteeing the human rights to water and sanitation. In doing so our human family took an evolutionary step forward. We said that it is not acceptable to have to watch your child die of water-borne disease because you cannot afford to buy water. These new rights conferred on all governments the obligations to come up with a plan to provide clean water and sanitation to their people; to prevent third party destruction of their local sources of water; and to put the most vulnerable at the heart of all water policy.

This means that governments should not be permitting the destruction of water sources by mining companies. They should not allow millions to be displaced from their land to make way for corporate land grabs. They are required to put people and communities ahead of economic interests in allocating water. And they need to invest in safe, accessible public water systems and stop the profit motive from interfering with the human right to water. Two hundred and thirty-five cities around the world, including Paris, have ended their love affair with privatization and brought their municipal water services back under public control. This has provided funds to fight pollution and ensure more equitable distribution of water.

Most essentially, the human right to water is an issue of justice, not charity. It requires a challenge to the current power structures that support unequal access to the world's endangered water supplies.

So that leads me to my third hard fact, and that is that the dominant model of development followed by most of our leaders and international institutions is not only a huge part of the problem but it is getting in the way of a solution. We live in a world that enshrines the inalienable right to accumulate more and more private property and wealth through an increasingly deregulated global market. In this world, the gap between rich and poor grows steadily - between and within countries. Last month it became official: the 1% finally owns 50% of everything.

In this world, millions of indigenous and rural small farmers are displaced by foreign investors in massive land and water grabs. Millions more are displaced to make way for free trade zones, developers, forced urbanization, large scale mining operations, mega dams and tourist resorts. With their homes gone, they swell the slums of burgeoning cities.

In this world, governments initiate aggressive policies to privatize water resources in order to entice foreign capital. Too often, they privilege economic users for dwindling water sources over communities, literally making life and death decisions for their people.

In this world, many governments - North and South - are also slashing their environmental and water protection laws to please global capital. They sign trade and investment treaties such as CETA, TTIP and TPP that give transnational corporations the right to sue governments for any new measures to protect their water or the human rights of their people, thus locking in the lowest common standards.

In this world, water is seen as a resource for industrial development and so we not only dump our effluents into water, we drain watersheds to move water to where it is convenient for us. An advisor to President Roosevelt promoted the building of mega dams, saying that the conquest of nature would not be complete until the waters "on, under and above" the surface area brought under complete human control.

It is not a large step then to seeing water as a commodity being bought, hoarded, sold and traded on the open market. Or used to promote private water utilities and services in poor countries, as the World Bank, the World Water Council and the 2030 Water Resources Group do. Or, through water pollution trading, which allows big polluters to buy their way out of regulatory compliance.

How do we start to talk about the crisis of water and megacities? With a critical examination of these and other policies that favour global markets over the lives of people and the health of ecosystems. And by confronting the tyranny of the 1% with the creation of a just global economy.

We can start with a new water ethic. Rather than seeing water as a resource for profit, we need to understand that it is the essential element in all living ecosystems. All policies and practices must be planned with the preservation of water at their core. Not only do we have to reject the market model for our water future, we must put ourselves at the service of undoing what we have done to the natural world and hope it is not too late. Our current legal systems for protecting the environment are not working because they were not designed to do so. They view nature and water as our property. We need new universal laws that respect the integrity of ecosystems and allow other species than our own to fulfil their evolutionary role on Earth.

What would food production look like if we valued water? I can assure you it would not be a chemical-intensive, industrial-based system designed for ever-greater exports but would favour local, organic and sustainable farming.

Would we dare frack for gas knowing that we are destroying huge amounts of groundwater or move dirty oil laced with chemicals on, under and around our precious waterways?

What would trade agreements look like if they had to take into account the damage done to water of ever more relentless destruction of watersheds to meet the growing demand of consumers or the vast amounts of virtual water being exported in the form of commodities?

We can start right here at COP21! The European Parliament has adopted in its official negotiating position, a carve-out to protect a climate agreement from corporate challenges. The concern is that under ISDS, foreign corporations could sue governments trying to introduce measures to curb greenhouse gas emissions and protect their water sources once back home if these measures threaten the corporate bottom line. Introduced by Gus Van Harten, a Canadian legal scholar, this carve out could become a model for other environmental and human rights treaties around the world.

In closing, may I dream a little? The distinguished American anthropologist and writer David Harvey calls us to reimagine cities by asserting our right to change them after our "heart's desire". Thirty years of market capitalism and economic globalization, promoting the notion of scarcity, have created ghettoized cities, homelessness, deep inequality and desperation, he says.

But a new right - the "Right to the City" - could create a new urban commons, an inclusive public sphere of active democratic participation and a roll back of the relentless privatization of public spaces we have witnessed.

Imagine a city where all who are there want to be there and are not dispossessed of their rural lands and livelihood. Imagine caring for our water as a fiercely managed public trust based on the principles of justice and sustainability. Imagine a world in which water becomes nature's gift to teach us how to live in peace with one another and dwell more lightly on this lovely planet.

It is all possible. A blue and just future is possible. .

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Maude Victoria Barlow is a Canadian author. She is the National Chairperson of the Council of Canadians, a citizens' advocacy organization with members and chapters across Canada. She is also the co-founder of the Blue Planet Project, which works internationally for the human right to water. Maude chairs the board of Washington-based Food & Water Watch, is a founding member of the San Francisco-based International Forum on Globalization, and a Councillor with the

Hamburg-based World Future Council. In 2008/2009, she served as Senior Advisor on Water to the 63rd President of the United Nations General Assembly. She has authored and co-authored 16 books.

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Water, Megacities and Global Change