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Water as Commons in undemocratic Postcolonial South?

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Abstract

Water privatization processes in cities of the Global South are increasing, in the forms of water service concessions with private operators, an extensive use of bottled water and privately organized massive ground water extractions. Is (re)municipalization the answer to the problems caused by the on-going privatization? In the context of water re-municipalization processes in many European cities, there are common challenges related to the limits to governance-by-government, the role of public authorities in overcoming the problems of infrastructural investments and environmental hazards, as well as new needs for democratic participation of communities. Yet, in the re-municipalization processes, new institutions and alternative discourses have emerged to support the implementation of human right to water. The conditions for such institutions to emerge for addressing public wellbeing are not met in Southern cities. Instead, their communities must deal with fragmented welfare systems, the absence of progressive pro-poor political parties, ongoing state-promoted violence and land-water grabbing, as well as policy making processes that are far from being transparent and accountable. Perhaps fundamentally we need to imagine a different trajectory of southern cities. Water as commons might be an alternative concept to the dichotomy of water as public or private goods. Treating water as commons means treating it as a holistic social-ecological cycle instead of separated sub-sectors (clean water supply, wastewater handling, drainage or flood management). Water commoning is a form of social-ecological movement that forge a new policy paradigm that promotes citizen control over water. This movement for commoning should depart from two fundamental layers of recognizing the Post-colonial South. First, an account of the regions as being saturated by diverse forms of unevenness and inequality that are partly maintained by the institutional legacy of colonialism (in law and regulation, land titling mechanism, planning and policy tradition, etc.). Second, an acknowledgement that this institutional legacy has been worsened by newer generations of modernist institutions which allow the continuous technocratic approach to the needs for water, sanitation and environmental services.

Reading material

Demaria, F., & Kothari, A. (2017). The Post-Development Dictionary agenda: paths to the pluriverse. *Third World Quarterly*, 38(12), 2588-2599. [DOI](#)

Villamayor-Tomas, S., & García-López, G. A. (2021). Commons Movements: Old and New Trends in Rural and Urban Contexts. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 46, 511-543. [DOI](#)



[Prathiwi Widyatmi Putri](#) is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie postdoctoral fellow at the Department of International Agricultural Policy and Environmental Governance, University of Kassel. Her current research examines the conditions of possibilities for turning water conflict into water co-production, towards theorizing polycentric water governance in the context of post-colonial South.

About the Colloquium Series: IASC Europe & CIS is organizing this colloquium series to support the communication among the IASC members in the region and beyond to facilitate content-based exchange and cross-disciplinary networking on bringing together the commons scholarship and practice with policy.