



## SYMPOSIUM: CORPORATE POWER AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND STRATEGIES

### Water is a Human Right! Grassroots Resistance to Corporate Power

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#### Abstract

*In this short piece, I seek to explore two main questions: 1) How can communities take control over local governance and shape local economic futures? and 2) How can local communities effectively band together to support world-system transformation? I examine examples of transnational organizing around water and, specifically, the National Summit on the Human Right to Water held in Abuja, Nigeria in January 2019. A repeated theme at the Summit was the idea that privatization is a threat because the narrative of the profit-based solution of privatization is at odds with the idea that people—and their human right to basic needs like water—come before profit. Privatization is a threat to human rights everywhere, and as climate change progresses resources will become even more scarce, with more of a push from corporations seeking to control and commodify water. One of the most powerful short-term results of this summit, therefore, was how it served as a space for global solidarity building around the human right to water.*

**Keywords:** Water, Transnational Social Movements, Human Rights, Alter-globalizations

“Water is life, sanitation is dignity!” These words of a speaker at the recent [National Summit](#) on “The Human Right to Water: Nigeria’s Water Emergency: From Resistance to Real Solutions Against Corporate Control” in Abuja, Nigeria capture the core motivation for this global water



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activist convergence.<sup>1</sup>The idea that water is a human right and the recognition that issues of access to safe water and basic sanitation cannot be separated are becoming increasingly urgent in this era of climate change, a time that promises uncertain futures and growing conflicts related to water. Some regions will have too much water, others too little.

In 2015, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) noted, “the world has not really woken up to the reality of what we are going to face in terms of the crises as far as water is concerned.”<sup>2</sup> Conflicts over water and its scarcity link directly to global economic policies. All too often, governments, corporations, and international financial institutions work in tandem to create policies that are detrimental to people and to the environment. In a growing range of cases people resist. The goal of this “National Summit” gathering was to serve as a place for affected people to build solutions and resist the mounting pressures resulting from the privatization of water utilities. It was a space for dialogue about how to (re)claim the public sphere—the global commons—of water. In this short piece, I reflect on some of my experiences at the Abuja Summit and explore how communities are working in places around the world to shape their local economic futures. I also consider how the gathering served as an example of how local communities are working together to enact world-system transformation.

Various speakers and participants at the summit noted the similarities between struggles over water in Lagos, and other struggles in the world, including those of Flint, Michigan and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Children in the United States are sick with high levels of lead; Lagos is surrounded by water, but the people have nothing to drink. This means a future of violence, illness, and poverty. The solution, according to summit participants, is that water systems around the world must be modernized in a way that places control in the hands of people and that is transparent and democratic. This is the only way to ensure the human right to water is recognized and respected. As Nnimmo Bassey, Chair of the Board for Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria asserted: “All of the polluted waters in this country have been privatized by polluters”—and then oil companies use that water as a place to dump oil. This is why the right to water must be defended at the regional, national, and international levels. The summit, Bassey reminded us, was a place to share strategies and prepare to defend collective rights. This means working to ensure the human right to water, including the need to clean up the Niger Delta and all polluted waters in this country and the world.

As regular readers of this journal know, there is mounting evidence that the current form of “development” and economic globalization advanced by global financial institutions has furthered

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Aly Shaw for your edits and comments.

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/world-has-not-woken-up-to-water-crisis-caused-by-climate-change/>

the interests of corporations and fueled poverty and environmental degradation (Escobar 2008, 2015). The summit served as a space for activists to articulate “alter-globalizations,” moving beyond mere criticism of the current system to offer a vision of what could be—in this case, advancing the concept and creation of a world where rights are centered above profit (Bakker 2007). Speakers at the summit articulated both resistance to the privatization of water (or expulsion of people away from resources held in the common good) and ideas of what else is possible: the spaces that, as Santos (2004) argues, serve as the “sociology of emergences” where contemporary social movements engage with each other to envision and enact alternatives to capitalist social relations. Drawing on David Harvey’s framing of the “right to the city,” it is about people organizing to claim a collective right, working to generate something new that does not yet exist (Harvey 2012: 137-138).

A repeated theme was the idea that privatization is a threat because the privileging of the market-system and privatization contradicts fundamental values. Participants stressed the point that people must come before profit, and that all people—regardless of geographic position, race, class, gender—are entitled to human rights for the simple fact that they are human. Privatization is a threat to human rights everywhere, and as climate change progresses resources will become even scarcer, intensifying the push from corporations to control and commodify water. Speakers also challenged the prevailing policies of “public private partnerships” or “PPPs,” which they say never work out to the benefit of the people. As one speaker noted, “PPPs use what you have, run it down” and then leave. All of the risk is turned over to the public, with all of the profit going to the corporation.

One example of a failed PPP occurred in Pittsburgh when the city government entered into a contract with the French company Veolia. Veolia is one of the largest corporations involved in water privatization and is currently on the shortlist to privatize water in Lagos. This would have a potentially devastating impact on that city and could cause a ripple effect throughout the continent of Africa. In Pittsburgh, the public utility company for the city had been plagued by administrative problems as well as financial distress caused by the interest rate swap die-off involving hundreds of millions of dollars in debt. To “fix” this problem, Pittsburgh hired Veolia in 2012 to manage operations, and the contract stipulated that Veolia would get to keep 50 cents of every dollar saved under its management (Lurie 2016). But as Aly Shaw with the [Pittsburgh Our Water Campaign](#) (OWC) shared at the summit, Veolia did not invest anything into the system. Instead, under Veolia’s management, workers were laid off and an illegal chemical switch was made that spiked lead levels. Shortly after Veolia’s contract was terminated, news of the city’s lead problem was announced. The OWC emerged soon after and focused on tackling the lead problem, connecting it to the larger problem of privatization. The demands have been for public, safe, and affordable water. OWC saw the only way to solve the problems was to make the water authority more public

and democratic. There have been continued attempts by water and gas companies to buy Pittsburgh's water, but the community has been successful at pushing back, and officials have backed off privatizing for now.

On our last day in Abuja we drove over an hour away to where Nestlé has one of two water bottling plants in the country. When we arrived, we stood outside of Nestlé for a few minutes — surrounded by armed police—holding up signs that said, “Nestlé Take Your Hands Off Our Water” and “Water is a Human Right.” We next visited a community adjacent to the Nestle plant. While there, we met the chief. Nestlé had given him an old packing container for a house—a gift intended essentially to buy him off. Nestlé had also built new water pumping stations, although no water flows from the taps. A plaque had been placed on the pump, dated January 30, 2019—two days before we arrived. This was heartbreaking to see, but it also made me angry. The level of arrogance, colonialism, and frankly, audacity in these insulting and dehumanizing actions is just staggering.

As an activist and organizer, I have learned that anger is a powerful—even critical—tool. As a scholar, I have struggled with my role and the notion of “objectivity.” Yet anger is an important catalyst. Or, as Rachel Watkins argues, “There’s a political knowing that comes out of anger” (Watkins 2019). There is a need for “ethical epistemology”—that knowledge production must be derived with and from the community (Watkins 2018:43). There is a need for “intellectual activism” in scholarship (Hill Collins 2015). This is particularly critical in the face of resisting transnational corporate power. Corporations work across geographic borders; so too must the resistance. This is also why a world-historical perspective to understanding present dynamics is imperative.

While traveling from Lagos, Nigeria to Osun we drove through Ibadan, one of Nigeria's largest cities. One of the water rights activists (who was driving) noted that Ibadan is in an oil producing state. Yet, he noted, he's never seen a tap with running water anywhere there. This point illustrates the deep inequality present in Nigeria and how that inequality means that basic needs—like the right to water and basic sanitation—are unmet, while wealth is extracted from the country to benefit the few. But what does it mean to talk about Nigeria as the place where more than 80 million people live on less than \$2 a day—“overtaking India” as the [“The Poverty Capital of the World?”](#) It is important to acknowledge the inequality and injustice that exist—but how that is done is also important in order not to reinforce negative and destructive narratives and stereotypes. Narratives and stereotypes that only talk about poverty and corrupt government officials, while ignoring the history of colonialism (and the present of economic imperialism and colonialism in the form of extractive multinational corporations and economic institutions like the World Bank), are dangerous. The processes through which global policies are enacted and enforced via political

institutions typically reproduce the processes and policies of imperialism and colonialism (Smith 2008: 44-45). While some argue that we live in a “post-colonial” time, political and economic structures maintain and sustain “colonial modes of development” (Banerjee 2001:330).

It is important to also acknowledge how academic scholarship has reinforced these systems of colonialism, imperialism, and racism. For the past century, the dominant focus of transnational organizing (in academic literature at least) has been “from the West to the rest,” and the frequent attention to some movements in the United States has led to the neglect of transnational linkages between movements (see Connell 2007; Bracey 2016; Smith and Wiest 2005). It has also meant that organizing strategies and contributions from “Global South” movements have not been sufficiently recognized. Yet, as feminist scholars have pointed out, the standpoint offered by marginalized actors offers important insights into the operation of systems of power and the strategies of survival and resistance that less powerful actors adopt in order to survive and thrive (Hill Collins 2002; Connell 2007).

As Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee writes, there are a multitude of resistance struggles against transnational corporations and governments—for freedom, for land, for livelihood, and (I would add) for water—that span the continents. Banerjee argues that these movements are not just local or global, transnational or international. Rather, they “are more translocal in nature: local communities living (and dying) in so-called democratic societies but governed in very non-democratic ways that are engaged in conflicts with both the state and the market, and sometimes even with ‘civil society’ while also making connections with other resistance movements in different parts of the world” (2011:331). This idea of translocal resistance relates to the processes and discussion I saw taking place at the summit. Translocality is, according to Banerjee (drawing on Sassen 2006), the idea that there are “specific local spaces that are distributed across multiple nation states involving particular configurations of actors, resources, territory, authority, rights and relationships of power” (2011:331). Further, while these spaces are grounded in the local they are also increasingly networked with each other. Translocality provides for new insights into understanding and analyzing change; of seeing (and participating in!) movements as learning networks (see McMichael 2008).

The summit served as a learning network in the sense that participants (myself included) left with new understandings of how the fight for the right to water is not just a local fight. We left with a stronger sense that the right to water is a global struggle for the idea that every human being has the human right to safe water. We saw that we were fighting against the very same corporations and institutions, despite coming from different local sites of struggle. The summit helped to focus on the importance of shifting the prevailing narrative to one that prioritizes human rights over corporate profits.

One of the goals of the summit was to serve as a place for these critical network connections to be built and strengthened. In that space, activists worked to further develop a strategy to reclaim the idea that water is a right and that every person ought to have access to it. One of the most powerful short-term results of this summit, therefore, was how it served as a space for solidarity building. For people to not just hear of struggles elsewhere, but for people from Flint and Pittsburgh to meet our counterparts in Lagos and vice versa was a powerful experience. We all learned how much we share in our struggles and how much power and potential for change there might be in our solidarity. Hopefully, the networks built and grown there represent only the beginning of communities shaping their economic futures and banding together to support world-system transformation.

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