

Water is Not for Sale

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Interview with Maude Barlow, world-leading expert on water supply issues

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Is it even possible to think of privatizing a major common resource, such as water, essential for life on earth? To the point that it becomes the object of financial speculation on the market? The answer to this seemingly surreal question comes to us, as it often does, from the United States and, needless to say, it is yes.

The entry of water in the futures market, the so-called 'forward market', is almost certain to mark a momentous step in the history of humanity. This news from the United States is accompanied by other recent developments that cannot fail to raise alarm, especially for Italy. These include the latest [Ispra report](#) that documents the state of degradation of Italian water sources and the same conclusion regarding the health of its lakes, which are threatened by the phenomenon of eutrophication, caused by the excessive use of fertilizers in agriculture and their disposal in lake basins.

In September 2020 specifically, the European Commission filed an [infringement procedure](#) on the state of water in Lake Vico, in northern Lazio. We have to add the notorious statistic about bottled water to this data. Italy continues to be its biggest European Consumer.

All in all, there is more than enough material here to merit an opinion from Maude Barlow, who is internationally renowned

for having obtained the recognition of water access as a human right in her role as UN Special Rapporteur. Barlow, a founding member of the International Forum on Globalization and of the Council of Canadians, was awarded the alternative Nobel Right Livelihood Award in 2005 and is considered one of the world's most authoritative voices on all water-related issues.

We interviewed her to understand what is happening internationally and what to do to protect a resource that is vital to humanity's present and future.

Maude Barlow, let's start with the latest news. The CME Group – the world's largest financial derivatives exchange company – has launched the world's first water futures market, opening up speculation from financiers and investors. What are the immediate consequences and potential dangers of this act?

There is a massive race going on between those who see the world's dwindling clean water sources as a commodity to be put on the open market like oil and gas, and those who believe water is a human right, a common resource, and an essential public service. There are many ways in which water is commodified: the privatization of water services; the growing bottled water industry; water trading and water pollution trading (the exchange of fees between polluting agents); land and water grabs in developing countries; and now the creation of a water futures market where wealthy speculators will bid on and profit from drought and suffering, driving the price of water even higher in a world where billions endure a lack of access. While this is a terrible new development, I am not remotely ready to regard it as a finality. We are recovering many municipalities from privatization experiments. We are getting bans on bottled water through municipalities and universities converting to Blue Communities, which pledge to protect the human right to water access. There is a growing understanding that nature has rights and we need a legal

framework of protection for the water itself. We are already putting together a movement to stop the creation of a water futures market.

Your role was central to making the United Nations declare that access to clean water and sanitation is a human right. Do you think this right has been violated? And if this is the case, are there any steps that the UN can take?

There have been many positive developments since the UN recognized the right to water. Almost four dozen countries have either amended their constitutions or adopted a new law to protect the human right to water access. The UN resolution has been used in a number of legal cases around the world and is widely quoted in legal and political circles. Many governments have set targets for the fulfilment of this obligation, which are included in their Sustainable Development Goals. There is no doubt in my mind that creating a water futures market is a violation of the commitment to the human right to water and that it would certainly be worth trying to take this issue to the General Assembly, although, of course, the 'free' market would insist that it is exempt from any rules set by that body. I think political pressure on governments to stop this practice and declare water as a common resource is probably the best next step.

You have pointed out that the water crisis is particularly dangerous today, as we live through the COVID pandemic. What are the connections between the pandemic and the environmental crisis?

COVID has shone a spotlight on the human water crisis. At least half of the world's population does not have a place to wash their hands with soap and warm water – the first thing we were taught to do when the virus surfaced last year. Three quarters of households and nearly half of the health care facilities in the Global South lack access to clean water on site.

But the crisis is not restricted to developing countries. The World Health Organization reports that 57 million people in Europe do not have piped water at home and 21 million still lack access to basic drinking water services.

The silver lining, however, may be that aid money and funding coming from wealthy countries to assist the COVID struggle in poor countries, is going to establish permanent sanitation facilities. We need to protect the planet's water and more just access to it if we have any hope of dealing with such pandemics in the future.

You recently released a joint statement with the renowned environmentalist Vandana Shiva, underlining that the chemical and water-intensive model of industrial agriculture in California and many other parts of the world is a major driver of the water crisis. Agriculture (including irrigation, livestock and aquaculture) is by far the largest water consumer, accounting for 69% of annual water withdrawals globally. (FAO, AQUASTAT). How can we overcome this unsustainable production model?

You raise a very important point here. All over the world, traditional farming methods are being replaced by large industrial and corporate farming operations and factory farms. Not only are they producing massive chemical-laden waste that is dangerous for our waterways, creating deadly blue green algae, but they are also using water indiscriminately and not practising the water-saving techniques ingrained in the knowledge of Indigenous, peasant and family farmers all over the world. A few corporations own and control almost all aspects of food production, from meat to wheat, and they hold great sway with elected officials over agriculture policy. To truly deal with upcoming water shortages, we must address the way in which we grow food to stop the destruction of groundwater sources caused by industrial agriculture.

A recent report by Ispra (Superior Institute for Environmental

Protection and Research – Italy), detected 299 different polluting substances in surface-level Italian waters. Pesticides and herbicides are the most prevalent among them but fertilizers, which are the root of the eutrophication process, especially in many national lakes, are also present. In many villages around some of these lakes, the water is no longer potable. Is it an uniquely Italian problem or do you consider it to be global?

Eutrophication – the over-enrichment of lakes, rivers and oceans by nutrients – is rampant all over the world. The resulting oxygen depletion can create algal blooms and even ‘dead zones’ where life cannot survive. Many countries, even in the so-called developed world, have little or no regulation for dealing with the runoff from factory farms and industrial food production, even though they may have regulations for human waste. Here in my country, Canada, a study found that 246 major lakes are seriously compromised by eutrophication. This includes Lake Winnipeg, the 10th largest lake in the world, which is suffering badly because of hog farming on its shores. In some poor countries where much of the world’s consumer goods are produced, local water bodies are completely contaminated. Changing these practices has to come first in our plan for water protection.

With a production of 14 billion litres per year and an annual per capita consumption of 206 liters, Italy is the largest European consumer of bottled water (29 litres per capita more than Germany, +16.4%; 84 litres more than France, +68.9%). What do you think about this?

Bottled water started in Europe and spread to the rest of the world. It used to be packaged in glass in Europe but it is increasingly plastic these days. We are a planet drowning in plastic and we humans are now ingesting it in our food. We must break our bottled water habit and we need Italians to help this happen. Italy is the major consumer of bottled water in Europe and could lead the way in changing this practice and

helping to save the planet.

Which steps can civil society, farmers and consumers take to protect their right to water as a common good?

We must all demand that everything our governments do – every policy, every action – takes its effect on water into account. If that effect is harmful to water, we return to the drawing board. Trade agreements that protect corporate water abuse and over-exploitation must be challenged. Governments must legislate to protect the planet's threatened water supplies and human access to them. Clean, safe, public water for all, everywhere, has to be our goal and the only way to get there is to start truly protecting our precious water sources and stop seeing water as a resource for our profit and convenience.

Can you walk us through the Blue Communities project?

We first introduced the concept of a Blue Community wherever a local municipality, university, or even a religious community, is committed to protecting water as a common resource. The pledge to become a Blue Community is really three-fold: to protect water as a human right; to promise to keep water services public; and to phase out bottled water on municipal premises and events. Many European cities added a fourth: to promote public-public partnerships rather than public-private in their dealings with the Global South.

The whole concept started in Canada when we had a right wing government promoting the privatization of water services and we wanted to reach municipalities, getting them to promote public services, before the government did. It has been very successful here. To my surprise, the concept got picked up in other places, especially in Europe, and some universities, faith-based communities, etc. Paris, Berlin, Brussels, Munich, Montreal, Vancouver and Los Angeles are among the cities who have already signed up. So I would love to see

Italy embrace the project. We worked with the coalition that undertook the successful referendum against privatization in 2011 and we are still in close touch with the various water justice movements.

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