

# The New Water Wars

## Collective Action after Decentralization in El Alto, Bolivia

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In the twenty-first century, wars are as likely to be fought over water as they are over oil. The world is facing an acute water crisis due to pollution, climate change, and surging population growth. From contaminated surface water to depleted groundwater sources, to the inevitable consequences of global warming, scientists warn that within the next 50 years substantial portions of the globe will lose access to adequate resources. Confronting this issue in the near-term is the small, landlocked country of Bolivia, which is reliant on rapidly-shrinking glaciers for much of its water supply. In recent years, Bolivia has received considerable global attention for the success of its social movements in reclaiming critical resources (land, water and gas) from transnational corporations. While such efforts strengthened grassroots power and contributed to the successful election of social-democratic President Evo Morales, 30-plus years of neoliberal reforms have fractured relations among actors at municipal, regional and national levels, constraining their ability to act collectively to address large-scale problems such as water scarcity.

### A History of Resistance

At the core of Bolivia's urban-based social movements has been the question of control of natural resources. Indeed, many scholars mark the 2000 "Water War" in Cochabamba as a critical turning point for these movements in their successful resistance to neoliberal reform. In 1999, Cochabamba experienced a sharp increase in the cost of water when its municipal supply was sold to Aguas de Tunari, a subsidiary of US construction giant Bechtel. Diverse groups of people came together across race, class and social lines in order to

stand against a business-oriented model of resource provisioning. Through broad-based protests and civil disobedience, the residents successfully reclaimed their water supply.

This success was later replicated in the city of El Alto. In the late 1990s, the Goni administration sold a 30-year water concession for El Alto and La Paz to the sole bidder, the Aguas del Illimani consortium, led by French company Lyonnaise des Eaux. This policy was designed with the support of the World Bank as a "pro-poor" strategy to balance public and private interests for the benefit of all, and was perceived in international development circles as a successful model for other nations in the Global South (Laurie and Crespo 2007, Arbona 2007). As in Cochabamba, this concession resulted in dramatic increases in cost and left substantial portions of the city without service. After considerable organizing and mobilization on the part of the Federación de Juntas Vecinales (FEJUVE), an association of neighborhood organizations, and other social movements over several years, Aguas del Illimani returned the concession in 2005.

Although these cases are representative of Bolivians' resistance to the commoditization of natural resources, grassroots movements have not successfully translated such actions into substantial improvements in access to potable water in marginal urban areas and rural peripheries. Residents of El Alto still face prohibitive costs for new connections to the water supply, and must invest considerable community labor to expand

the network of pipes in order to receive service. This failure to provide adequate drinking water to new *barrios* promises to be a critical issue in the future, as the city continues to expand.

### A New Challenge

Although the public debate has focused on the dangers of privatization in limiting access to potable

water in El Alto, a new discourse has surfaced in government circles surrounding the threat of global warming and glacial melt. El Alto and its sister city, La Paz, depend on glaciers in the Cordillera Oriental for most of their water supply. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warns that rising temperatures could melt most of Latin America's glaciers by 2022. At the local level, the interim water

in a complex negotiation over national and local priorities in dealing with the management and distribution of water. The election of Morales and the success of social movements in adding their needs to the national agenda have opened up a new space for addressing water treatment and delivery in a way that prioritizes social welfare over corporate profit. However, there is still much friction within the Morales administration over the role of the state in resource management, and years of decentralization and privatization continue to influence everyday water politics in ways

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company for El Alto and La Paz, Empresa Publica Social de Agua y Alcantarillado (EPSAS), warned at the beginning of the year that the water level at the Tuni Condoriri reservoir was 30% below normal, and that water rationing might be necessary by the end of 2009 (*El Alteo*, February 15, 2009).

Long-term shifts in both precipitation and snow cover are likely to have profound consequences for the welfare of people in both cities, but there is a considerable degree of uncertainty among stakeholders

that make universal distribution of water an aspiration at best.

According to Kohl and Farthing (2006), the 1994 Law of Popular Participation, enacted by the Goni administration, empowered and emboldened social movements by transferring state functions (including management of infrastructure) to the municipal level and enhancing public participation, while dangerously absolving the state of critical responsibilities. Although Morales has initiated negotiations of publicly-owned municipal water systems for El Alto and La Paz, residents of El Alto continue to express considerable distrust of the process and press for greater local control and independence from La Paz. This is an understandable approach, given the unequal power of residents of these cities and the failure of the state to improve the quality of poor *Alteños'* lives, but contemporary problems like water provisioning in an era of global warming are likely beyond the reach and power


## COMMENTARY

of municipalities, even with meaningful public participation. The success of the FEJUVE in framing the debate over water management and delivery in these negotiations reflects both their empowerment through popular participation and the limits of their power in the context of a critically weakened state.

The contention over water management and delivery highlights the seriousness of this emerging problem, as poorer countries like Bolivia will be the first to deal with the consequences of our declining ecosystems. We have launched a longitudinal, collaborative and interdisciplinary study of how different social actors negotiate control over water management, and how these decisions play out at the local level in terms of access to water and health. By understanding how Bolivian social movements negotiate this emergent crisis in the context of a weakened but sympathetic state, we hope to develop insights and potential models for countries in the Global South experiencing similar problems.

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## The Water Spigot

### Water Access, Safety and Perception Near the Ashokan Reservoir

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Every day local residents arrive by car at a public water spigot off of a county road in the Catskill Mountains, 100 miles north of Manhattan, to fill empty five-gallon "water cooler" bottles. Due to natural and industrial contaminants in their groundwater supply, they collect this water for drinking and cooking. Some are short-term visitors, awaiting test results after having "shocked" their wells with chlorine to kill E coli, coliform bacteria, or other parasites. Others have relied on this spigot for more than fifteen years because their groundwater contamination is too extensive or expensive to treat.


Beyond the spigot to the north looms the pristine water of the Ashokan Reservoir, constructed in 1914 amid substantial area protests. Hudson Valley residents were relocated and entire towns were flooded to create one of the largest and deepest water supplies for New York City. Today local rural inhabitants remain cut off from the reservoir; they cannot drink its water or, in some locations, even drive near it anymore due to heightened security after 9/11. Although most residents accept their current dependence on public spigot water without complaint, feelings of bitterness surrounding the reservoir remain. According to one study respondent, "our towns literally gave their life so that New York City could have clean drinking water."

"You can never really understand water conservation until you carry your own water," said another respondent, who has been using the spigot for seven months. Overall, she values the "physical lesson" she's learned in "spending this time and energy to get my basic needs met." She has come to feel that water is "more valuable than gas or oil" and adds, "it has increased my awareness of water being bought and sold as a commodity and has made me angrier at this injustice."

Another resident, a mother of two young children, spoke about the social aspect of the public spigot: "I feel like we are an independent culture, we have everything we need in our own homes ... but coming to the communal spring, I feel connected to the other people who use this water." She and her husband purchased a foreclosed property 15 months ago and found that the colloidal clay, methane, coliform bacteria and sulfur in their well water were too expensive to treat. They continue to use well water for bathing, dishes, laundry, feeding their cats and chickens, and hydrating the

vegetable garden (supplemented by barrels of rain-water), but they worry that their backyard vegetables "could make someone sick."

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Photos courtesy Nan Bress. 



Local residents with groundwater contamination collect drinking water at public spigots and sources scattered throughout the area.



Catskill area residents cannot access the drinking water or many area roads near the Ashokan Reservoir, which serves residents of New York City 100 miles away.