

Tricky questions updated



Why is WDM running the Dirty Aid, Dirty Water campaign?

What involvement has WDM had with other local anti-privatisation groups and organisations in the South?

Prior to launching the Dirty Aid, Dirty Water campaign, WDM liaised with civil society groups and NGOs in the South. Concerns raised by Southern campaigners regarding the role of the UK Department for International Development (DfID) in pushing water privatisation played a key role in shaping the campaign.

In Ghana, the National Coalition Against Privatisation (NCAP) requested WDM's support with their fight against water privatisation. Working closely with NCAP, WDM mobilised UK activists and following targeted campaigning, British company Biwater withdrew from the bidding process.

Following DfID's invitation for companies to tender for a contract to pave the way for water privatisation in the capital of Sierra Leone, Freetown, WDM visited Sierra Leone to establish links with NGOs and campaigners there. These links strengthen the legitimacy of our call for the UK Government to stop supporting water privatisation in Freetown. Likewise, WDM's support bolsters the demands made by Sierra Leonean campaigners of their own Government and DfID representatives in Freetown.

Shouldn't the question be, how do we ensure adequate access to water to solve the global water crisis, rather than focussing on the failures of privatisation?

Over 1 billion people do not have access to a safe water supply. Tackling this problem is of central importance. It is equally important to ensure that projects that aim to address this question are based on the best available evidence of what works, so that the best solution is implemented. Time and again we have seen water privatisation projects being pushed with no alternatives

being investigated, and it is these same projects that frequently fail to deliver for the poor.

Privatisation is not the accidental result of 'natural' market forces. It is the result of a specific political project serving specific interests and has to be backed by significant political and financial support from governments. This support has been delivered at the expense of promoting workable solutions to the water crisis.

WDM wants to ensure that *all* aid money spent on improving access to clean water is used effectively. This means campaigning to promote successful alternatives whilst highlighting the failure of water privatisation in order to achieve positive change in the future.

At present, the public sector is responsible for the vast majority of global water provision. If we are to meet the Millennium Development Goal of halving the number of people without access to clean water and sanitation by 2015, it makes sense to reform this sector.

We are calling on the UK Government to start supporting public sector reform and public-public partnerships which have been shown to work in a variety of contexts around the world. WDM has provided DfID with examples of these workable public solutions, and together with a UN Advisor on water and sanitation, met with senior civil servants at DfID to discuss the public way forward.

Does WDM think that water is free and therefore people shouldn't pay for it?

While water is free when it falls from the sky, distributing it to households and managing human waste involves time, effort and considerable resources. The level of investment required in the water and sanitation sector in developing countries is huge – and somebody has to pay. Whether water and sanitation are in public or private hands, this money has to come from somewhere, whether out of general taxation or charged for directly.

What WDM is saying is that no-one should be denied access to these services simply because they cannot afford to pay. The problem we have seen with the private sector is that prices are often raised unnecessarily so that the company

can pay off its expensive borrowing or repatriate profits to its shareholders. We have seen companies 'cherry pick' the most wealthy areas in cities (i.e. leaving governments to provide for the poor) which denies the possibility of cross-subsidisation between rich and poor.

Price increases may well be an important lever in many developing countries for ensuring improvements in the water and sanitation sector. For example, the operator in Porto Alegre got public agreement through a participatory budgeting process for an 18 per cent increase in prices to finance a new sewerage treatment plant.¹ However, price rises must be part of an integrated policy process which ensures:

- They do not make water supply unaffordable.
- That surplus is reinvested in a way that improves the service, not taken out as profit for distant shareholders.
- There is cross-subsidy to ensure fair and affordable prices.
- They are accompanied by other measures designed to improve the service e.g. more participatory decision making and focus on improving revenue collection.

What about water access and the water wars that are happening, are you working on that?

Many people predict that the next wars will be over water as it becomes scarcer and access becomes even more limited. WDM recognises the importance of this issue but is not directly campaigning on it.

A related issue is local community control over water resources. We have seen recent examples in which companies have been accused of depleting water resources in a particular locality.

As a campaigning organisation WDM tries to influence and change key policies. Currently, our water campaign is specifically looking at how DfID is spending our aid money on water projects that are meant to alleviate poverty. Our research shows that DfID is both pushing water privatisation, which is failing to deliver for the poor, and investing little into researching and promoting alternative solutions. In order to campaign as effectively as possible WDM is primarily focussing on this issue. That said, WDM offers whatever solidarity it can to communities fighting to gain control over their water resources.

Privatisation – can it solve the world's water crisis?

What is privatisation?

When WDM talks about the problems caused by water privatisation it is referring to *for-profit private companies taking responsibility for the management of the service*. This could be in one of several forms including:

- A long-term concession or lease, under which the private company takes over the whole operation.
- A lease arrangement where a company takes over the assets and management of a utility from the public sector (e.g. for five to ten years).
- A management contract, where the private company supplies just senior managers.
- The more obvious, and much rarer, complete sale of public assets to the private sector (divestiture).
- The private sector building and operating a new reservoir or treatment plant under what is termed a BOT scheme (Build, Operate, Transfer).

This does not mean WDM is arguing that profit-making companies have absolutely no role to play at all in the water and sanitation sector (see page 3).

Is WDM ideologically against privatisation?

No. WDM is not against all forms of privatisation. There are many examples where there is a strong case for turning a state-owned enterprise (for example, a state run beer company) over to the private sector. However, in the case of water and sanitation, WDM is opposed to privatisation based on an analysis of the evidence. In contrast, the UK Government continues to pump money into the privatisation model despite the mounting and compelling evidence that profit-making companies are, time and again, failing to deliver water and sanitation to the poor in developing countries. This suggests either vested interests are being served or an ideology is being pursued.

Is WDM against private sector involvement in public sector schemes?

WDM supports initiatives that have been proven to work. This has generally been where water services have been managed by the public sector. When left in the hands of private business, case after case shows a failure to supply

developing countries with adequate water services. However, there have been examples where public utilities have successfully subcontracted particular functions to the private sector. The private sector can help build up management, financial and operational capacity of public services, especially in urban areas. The key to success in these cases is the retention of public control, as in the case of the successfully run Porto Alegre's not-for-profit water operation where work is subcontracted to private companies whilst control remains in public hands.²

Water and sanitation systems in developing countries need investment. Aren't private companies necessary to provide this?

The private sector doesn't bring money, it follows money. The record of water privatisation has shown that private companies do not bring significant investment to poor countries. Companies have to borrow money to invest and as investment in poor countries is a risk, companies have decided to transfer the risk to the countries themselves. The Ghanaian Government, for example, is supposed to raise over £250 million in international loans just to pay for the private company's operational costs. Local campaigners estimate that water price increases of 30-40 per cent will be necessary just to repay these debts.

In Tanzania, City Water, a subsidiary of UK company Biwater, was contracted to improve water and sanitation services in the capital Dar es Salaam. However, according to the Government of Tanzania, City Water failed to invest even half the amount it was supposed to and was subsequently kicked out of the country. Biwater is now trying to recoup its losses by suing the Tanzanian Government at an international level, and by making a claim on its insurance policy with the UK Export Credit Guarantee Department.

Multinational water companies have recognised that there is simply no way that they have the capacity to meet the Millennium Development Goals. There is no escaping the fact that, if these Goals are to be achieved, massive investment will have to come from governments. The question is not whether, but **how** this public money should be spent.

Don't poor countries need private companies to supply water and sanitation to the rural population?

Solutions to the problems of rural water supply and sanitation differ to those for urban areas. The focus placed on multinational companies as the answer to the water crisis has detracted from finding genuine solutions for rural populations. The main priority for water multinationals is ensuring enough profit is made to satisfy their shareholders. If water companies are having difficulty servicing the urban poor and meeting shareholder goals, there is little hope they will be able to provide an efficient water supply and sanitation service to the rural poor.

Our Government needs to look urgently at new strategies for water provision in rural areas.

Some privatisations go wrong, but does this mean that it never works?

Water privatisation problems occur when the private sector takes responsibility for managing the water supply service. This includes everything from the sale of public assets to a simple management contract. This is because of the fundamental conflict between the private sector's legal obligation to maximise profit for shareholders and the demands of improving water delivery and sanitation on the ground in financially challenging circumstances.

The rare examples of private water and sanitation systems in the developing world that seem to work are largely down to the private sector taking over an already well functioning system. For example, in Santiago, Chile, the water system was described by the World Bank as the most efficient utility in Latin America before privatisation.³ The private sector did nothing to keep it efficient and successful that the public sector could not have done in a more democratically accountable way. Other brief successes (Cartagena, Buenos Aires, Cote d'Ivoire), have seen unacceptable price increases due to currency crashes upsetting the balance between income collected in the local currency, and loans taken in dollars.

Isn't the private sector more efficient than the public sector?

No. Although the private sector is probably more efficient than an over-bureaucratized, under-funded, debt-crippled

and locally corrupt state-run utility, that is not the same as being the most efficient way to reform and run a service. The campaign to oppose water and sanitation privatisation is rooted in the belief that the public sector must be responsive to the population that it serves. Dramatic improvements in public water delivery have been achieved, often over just a few years, through various forms of public utility reform – which have far outweighed any ‘efficiencies’ achievable by the private sector.

This is especially true because the water sector lacks the market competition that is claimed to drive efficiency by pro-privatisation advocates. Water is a natural monopoly supply service – one pipe network to each town or settlement – making competition (between suppliers), and the resulting economic efficiencies, impossible. Evidence shows that where they are comparable private water providers are no more ‘efficient’ than public sector water providers. In some cases they are far less efficient. Leakage rates in the publicly run Netherlands water system is just 4 per cent, compared to privately run supplies in England and Wales which are above 20 per cent.⁴

Doesn't the private sector reduce scope for corruption?

No. Checks and balances that could prevent corruption, such as accountability and transparency, have been conspicuously missing from the process of privatisation. Water contracts are worked out behind closed doors with executives and government officials, free from any form of public scrutiny. Indeed, executives from the major companies, Vivendi-Veolia and Suez, have been convicted of bribing governments in order to obtain contracts or concessions on more favourable terms.⁵ The powerful economic incentives created by contracting-out and privatisation lead to a culture of bribery practised by multinational companies, all over the world.

Where work is put out to tender, it is critical to ensure that there is always an ‘in-house bid’ from the public sector, to set against any private bids, something that the UK Office of Fair Trading recommends as a key method for avoiding being cheated by a cartel (OFT 1995).⁶ Such an option is, however, repeatedly ignored by those governments – and the World Bank – that are pursuing privatisation.

Isn't it any country's right to privatise its own water if it so chooses?

The key issue here is choice. If a country clearly chooses to privatise water and sanitation with absolutely no donor interference, WDM has no quarrel with this. We may feel solidarity with the campaigns of citizens and organisations in those countries opposing such privatisation, and we may feel it is relevant to act in support of such campaigns if UK companies are involved. But in the absence of grassroots opposition, WDM, as a UK-based NGO is not in the habit of telling developing country governments what to do.

However, privatisation decisions in the poorest countries involving no outside interference are few and far between. There is a clear bias in funding priorities by the big aid donors that supports private sector provision of essential services. There are no ‘multi-donor’ finance initiatives aimed at supporting the public sector, for instance. And the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) continue to impose economic policy conditions such as privatisation, on developing countries in return for aid, loans and debt relief. Bilateral donors further reinforce these policies by making their aid conditional on the satisfactory implementation of a World Bank and/or IMF programme.

Add to this an institutional bias towards water privatisation within World Bank and bilateral donor research and advice, the lobbying of the private sector and the resulting ‘conventional wisdom’ amongst developing country policy makers that the private sector is ‘the solution’ – and the choices open to people and communities in the developing world are further constrained.

What if there's effective regulation in place?

Some NGOs and academics maintain that the private sector is reliable as long as there is sufficient regulation. While this statement may be true in itself, the current reality is that there is little capacity to regulate in developing countries. And regardless of the degree of regulation, issues such as currency crashes and the need for massive investment mean that, unless bailed out with huge public subsidies, private operators will increase prices dramatically and/or will fail to deliver.

If a poor country's public provider is failing due to bad governance and it lacks the institutional capacity to

improve, there is little chance this country will have the governance capacity to effectively regulate a water multinational. Privatisation is not, therefore, a 'solution' to poor governance; like a well-run public utility, privatisation requires strong and effective government.

Is water privatisation a condition of debt relief?

Yes. 27 out of 43 Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) contain water privatisation as a condition of debt relief.⁷ In many of these cases, privatisation was already a World Bank/IMF condition before the PRSP was drawn up, so the country government had no choice but to include the water privatisation or the PRSP would not have been agreed by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs). This has been the case in Ghana but the plans of the IFIs and the UK Government have been met with powerful and popular resistance as the country tries to keep control of its water.

Haven't companies adopted new ways of working?

The companies now bidding for contracts are keen to show that they have new ways of working due to past criticisms about lack of transparency, accountability and participation regarding their water provision for the poor. One example is Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP). WSUP describes itself as an innovative partnership between the private, public and civil society sectors with a commitment 'to making a significant contribution towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals for water and sanitation'. WDM will be watching this initiative with interest to see whether and how it works.

In some places (e.g. South Africa) private companies have given a set amount of free water to people each day – isn't that good?

Efforts like this to search for a solution are welcome. However, the strategy of providing set quantities of free water rather than operating progressive tariffs does not always work. The free amount given is rarely enough, particularly in poorer communities where the high incidence of HIV and other health risks means that more, rather than less water is needed. It also fails to address the inherent social inequalities – rich families get the free allocation as well.

There are successful initiatives in operation which enable society as a whole to have access to clean water, whilst still making enough money to keep the project running. When deciding where to allocate the aid budget, the UK Government could look at Penang, Malaysia where a system of cross-subsidisation with a social tariff is in operation.⁸ The system guarantees both clean water to poorer customers and sufficient profits which can then be reinvested in existing and new infrastructure.

Aren't big companies pulling out of developing countries anyway?

Companies are still bidding for contracts in developing countries although not as eagerly as in the 1990s. The main reasons for a decline in activity have been high risks and the difficulty in making a profit. This has led companies and donor countries to develop a strategy that transfers risk and costs away from companies and on to donors or the countries struggling to reform their water sector. In effect, profits are siphoned off to shareholders miles away but any losses are borne by the country or donors (as mentioned earlier in this section).

Another way companies can minimise the risk is through the Export Credit Guarantee Department. This ensures any losses are borne ultimately by the UK taxpayer. Of course, if the venture is successful profits stay with the company.

Should consultants promote water privatisation in developing countries?

Aren't the consultants just doing the studies they are paid to do?

The consultants are usually asked to advise on, or create a plan for, reforming public sector water provision. Invariably, the consultants short-listed for these contracts by DfID are privatisation experts. WDM has been unable to find any examples where these consultants recommended bolstering the public sector (through increased finance and reforming its operations).

Instead, in every case, they recommend some form of privatisation as 'the solution'. At best these companies are just not considering all the options or their terms of

reference – defined by donors – limit consideration to privatisation only, and at worst they are pursuing a narrow political agenda. Either way, it is up to our Government to recognise this and stop spending UK taxpayers money on them.

Are you opposed to Government funding for all consultants? Surely this is unreasonable.

WDM is not against part of the aid budget being used to fund genuine research. We are demanding that the UK Government stop using public money to fund a relatively small clique of ‘privatisation consultants’ whose research and advisory work in developing countries clearly demonstrates that they always recommend water privatisation (in some form or other), despite its continued failure to deliver water and sanitation services to the poor.

The UK Government should be part of the solution, not part of the problem. WDM believes the UK should actively champion different approaches to water and sanitation provision if the Millennium Development Goals are to be met. We are demanding that the UK Government stop funding ‘privatisation consultants’, stop putting money into multi-donor initiatives designed to increase private sector provision of water and sanitation and instead put its time, effort and money into solutions that have been shown to work.

Isn't the UK Department for International Development doing a good job?

I thought that DfID was one of the better government departments, is this not true?

The UK Government, through DfID, has taken some useful steps on development policy issues: untying aid, increasing the UK aid budget (although not enough), unilateral debt relief and a commitment to ending economic policy conditionality. Much of this change was in response to campaigning by NGOs, including WDM. DfID aid money can and does make a difference on the ground, but it is important that we hold our Government to account, so that all our aid money is used effectively.

On World Water Day 2005, the Secretary of State for International Development announced a doubling of aid to Africa for water and sanitation over the next three years, from £47.5 million in 2004-05, to £95 million in 2007-08, which WDM welcomed.

However, the UK Government still has much to do. Aid increases still fall well short of meeting the long-standing aid target of 0.7% of national income. Debt relief is still tied to damaging World Bank and IMF economic conditions. The UK, as part of the EU, is still forcing developing countries to liberalise through the World Trade Organisation. And the UK, through DfID, is still using aid money to push water privatisation – the focus of WDM’s Dirty Aid, Dirty Water campaign.

DfID only spends a few per cent of its water budget on water privatisation – isn't this actually a good thing?

According to DfID, its expenditure on water predominantly supports water and sanitation service delivery through public or community-led schemes, and in the case of its bilateral programme this is 95 per cent of funding. Support for private sector involvement for 2003/04 was estimated by DfID at £4 million out of a total budget of £80 million.⁹

WDM believes, for a number of reasons, that the use of this £4 million figure is misleading. Firstly, this only refers to money spent directly by DfID on water and sanitation; it does not, for example, include funding that DfID provides to the World Bank and multi-donor initiatives such as the Public Private Infrastructure Advisory Facility. This facility was set up by DfID in conjunction with the World Bank and is specifically designed to fund private sector technical assistance. Secondly, there are contracts which we know are not included in this list, but which we believe have supported privatisation initiatives affecting the water and sanitation sector in particular countries. An example of this is the £1 million awarded to pro-privatisation consultants Adam Smith International in October 2003 for “support to water sector regulation”.¹⁰

WDM would like to be able to analyse DfID’s expenditure ourselves so that we can come up with a solid figure for DfID’s overall spending on water and sanitation privatisation initiatives. However, despite several attempts under the Freedom of Information Act, to obtain information from DfID to enable us to undertake our own

analysis, we have been refused this information, on the grounds that it would cost too much for DfID to supply it.

However, whatever the actual figure, it is the **impact** of how this money is spent that WDM is most concerned with. When DfID spends money on consultants who advise on water privatisation, as it has done in Ghana, Tanzania and many other places (and will shortly do so in Sierra Leone), the impact of this money will be felt by residents in those countries for years, as the aid is being used to set long-term government policy. A few per cent of DfID's water budget invested in a failed solution can have really damaging effects on people's lives; and at the same time it is money that is not being spent on public sector reform and public-public partnerships, solutions which we know can help poor people access clean water and sanitation.

Doesn't the UK Government have expertise in privatisation?

The UK claims to have expertise in privatisation – surely our Government should support this and let other countries provide aid that supports other methods of service provision?

The purpose of the aid budget is not to support British business but to support poverty reduction. Creating more market opportunities for British multinationals is not synonymous with development goals aimed at lifting some of the world's poorest people out of poverty. On water specifically, major NGOs have called "the obsession with the private sector ... a total distraction [from the goal of] ... reaching the 1.2 billion poorest people in the world who lack access to safe water".¹¹

Wasn't water privatisation in the UK successful?

Information from groups across the board, ranging from campaigning and consumer organisations to the House of Commons and OFWAT, highlight serious failings of the water companies following privatisation in the UK: sharp increases in customer prices; excessive company profits; inadequate investment and regulation; disconnections; high leakage rates; low water pressure; and interruptions to service.¹² Companies are even coming back to the Government asking for subsidies to improve the system.

The UK experience highlights the difficulties of regulating a privatised water industry. Today UK regulation is still being reviewed despite the UK having a history of laws and rules already in place to protect the consumer – and much of this is only in place due to the driving force of the European Union. If the UK is having problems regulating companies how can poorer countries, for example Sierra Leone, just emerging from a civil war, be expected to protect its citizens from the multinationals keen to operate in the country.

Even if privatisation had been successful in the UK, this does not necessarily mean that it would be successful in poor countries (see section Privatisation – can it solve the world's water crisis?).

Does this have anything to do with PFI/PPP in the UK?

The consultants now receiving aid money to push the privatisation of water in developing countries learnt their trade during the last few decades of increased private sector involvement in public service provision in the UK. They have grown throughout this process but there are limits to the size of the 'privatisation market' in the UK, so the only way to expand their business and enhance profits is to develop and maintain an international presence.

How can we achieve sustainable solutions to the global water crisis?

Won't cheap water and sanitation encourage unsustainable use?

Working solutions to the crisis of limited access to water are not just about cheap water, they are far more sophisticated. Those fighting for better water access do not demand 'cheap' water, but clean, safe water that is universally provided and affordable to all. Systems that have achieved this, such as the public provider EAAB in Bogotá, Colombia, have introduced a highly progressive pricing system under which low-income groups pay affordable subsidised rates. At the same time, educational campaigns have reduced water consumption by around 30 per cent per person.¹³

Don't you need to recover the costs from water supply and sanitation in order to ensure long-term viability?

Cost recovery, either through taxation or direct charges, is essential in order to ensure long-term viability, but WDM believes that no one should be denied access to water and sanitation services because they cannot afford to pay.

Some of the most successful public utilities in the world recover all their costs. For example, DMAE in Porto Alegre is fully self-financed through the water bills paid for by the 1.4 million inhabitants.¹⁴ Yet as a not-for-profit company, it reinvests any surplus into improving the water supply. It also uses progressive tariffs and cross subsidies to ease the burden on the poor while making sure there is enough revenue to provide an adequate service for all. In contrast, profit-making foreign corporations recover costs for different purposes – to enhance the value of their share price and produce dividends for their shareholders, charging high prices across the board. Clearly the ultimate aim for any water system is to be financially sustainable.

Do you provide technical expertise to local communities to help them with water provision?

No. WDM is a campaigning organisation that seeks to achieve economic justice for the world's poor. WDM facilitates public activism to change the policies that are keeping people in poverty. WDM does not engage in service delivery on the ground in developing countries.

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