



WATER – NO PRIVATE MATTER

Democratic control of a public good

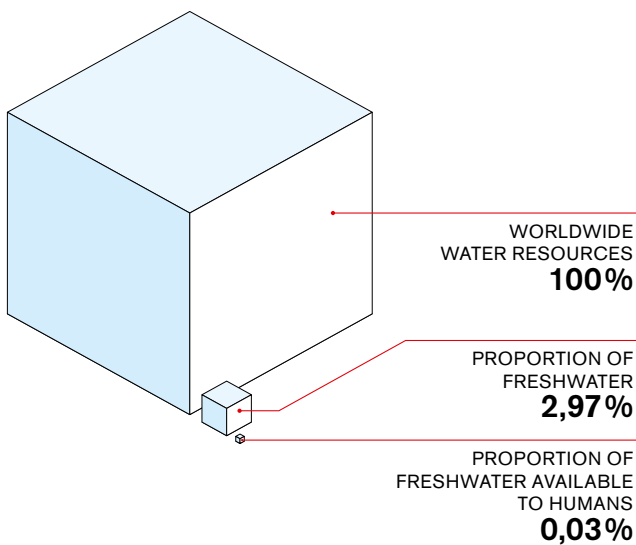
Water is the most important natural resource bar none. Yet climate change, overuse of groundwater, pollution, unfair distribution and a lack of good governance are threatening the human right to clean water. For Helvetas it is self-evident that the available water resources belong to everyone. Governments and public authorities must ensure the fair distribution of this resource. They may allocate revocable user rights to the private sector, but only if this takes place as part of a transparent and legitimate democratic process, and the oversight/control and regulation of a privately managed water supply system must remain public. Furthermore, water uses have to be aligned in a Water Use Master Plan (WUMP) at catchment level, which takes minimum flows for the environment into account. Helvetas is convinced that drinking water should not be free. Users should pay an appropriate fee for the operation and maintenance of water supply systems, and to promote efficient use. Nonetheless, even the excluded and marginalised who are unable to pay have a right to clean water; governments must establish mechanisms that safeguard their human right to water too.

WATER AS A HUMAN RIGHT

Water comes at a price

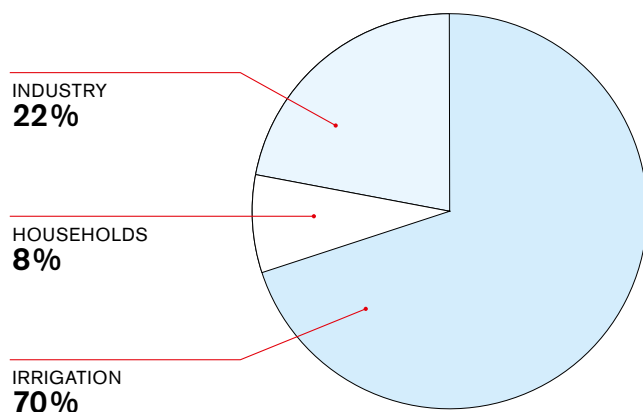
Only a very tiny proportion of freshwater resources worldwide are used for drinking water. Theoretically, there is sufficient water everywhere to guarantee drinking water for everyone, apart from in dry, extremely densely populated and highly contaminated areas.

World water resources



Source: www.worldwatercouncil.org

Human water use



Source: World Water Assessment Programme

In 1990 24 percent of the world's population had no access to clean drinking water. Although this proportion has since halved, 748 million people still live without clean drinking water (www.wssinfo.org). That is an awfully large number.

Clean drinking water provision is a major element of Helvetas' approach to development, its efforts to build good governance, and its national and international advocacy efforts for a sound development policy.

On 28 July 2010 the UN General Assembly recognized access to clean water and basic sanitation as a human right, thereby lending it additional political weight. Some important questions are still open, though: Who does water belong to? Who should manage it? Who allocates user rights? Who is responsible for ensuring that everyone has access to water?

The human right to water and sanitation is a basic principle that underpins all of Helvetas' operations. Every person, regardless of origin, sex and age, must have at least 25 litres of safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water per day for personal and domestic uses. Sustainable cost recovery is a prerequisite for the financial sustainability of water and sanitation systems, and it should be paid for through a blend of tariffs (paid by customers), taxes (governmental investments) and transfers (official development assistance). The state must safeguard the poorest and most marginalized people's human right to clean water through adequate subsidy mechanisms.

In the late 1980s and 1990s public administrations attempted to grant concession rights to private companies for the difficult and expensive task of managing water supplies, and developing countries were virtually forced to do so by the World Bank. Water privatization was controversial from the outset. (Neo)liberal advocates insisted that private companies' financial resources and know-how made them better qualified to carry out this task than corruptible public agencies. Market sceptics – generally on the left – were critical of the fact that privatization entrusted a vital resource to profit-orientated corporations, saying that these companies would develop water distribution systems where they stood to make a profit, i.e. mainly in middle- and upper-class neighbourhoods. Poor people, on the other hand, would not be able to afford water – always assuming that it even reached them.

These critics have been proved right, for privatization schemes have failed in many cities. One of these is Buenos Aires, where the Argentine government transferred responsibility for providing water to over 10 million residents to Suez Lyonnaise des Eaux in 1993. Thirteen years later the state realized that Suez had not expanded the network connections as agreed, and it terminated the contract.



Drinking water. The people of Nicueja, Cabo Delgado in Mozambique have had a public village well since 2012.

Cochabamba, Bolivia's third-largest city, also saw a failed attempt at water privatization in 1999/2000. There were riots after the private operator raised water prices. Bechtel and Suez Lyonnaise then withdrew from the city, despite having signed a 40-year concession agreement.

Helvetas believes that water is a common good. The state has both the right and the responsibility to assert national sovereignty over this resource. They may allocate revocable user rights to the private sector, but only if this takes place as part of a transparent and legitimate democratic process and the oversight/control and regulation of a privately managed water supply system must remain public (independent regulatory body). Furthermore, water uses have to be aligned in a Water Use Master Plan (WUMP) at the catchment level taking minimum flows for the environment into account, and they may not result in some sectors of the population no longer having access to sufficient water.

Badly-organized states are unable to deal with the complex business of supplying water, nor is it possible to distribute water fairly in a situation where a small section of the population dominates access to resources and maintains its power by corrupt means.

Helvetas demands transparent planning, implementation and monitoring of water schemes. The authorities must also show accountability to the beneficiaries for their decisions and for the use of funds. Helvetas therefore strives in its development projects to reduce the imbalance in power between the authorities and users, and to support authorities in their water use planning, as well as informing water users about their rights and responsibilities.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

The third way?

Public-private partnerships came into fashion in the 1980s. These partnerships can promote local know-how and a sense of civic responsibility, especially in rural areas. Helvetas is actively supporting one such project in the small town of Ancuabe in northern Mozambique. First, we assisted the town council with the construction of a water tower and a small distribution network, and a model is currently being tested by which a private company may charge water fees in return for maintaining the small system.

In many cases, it is when large foreign firms are involved in public-private partnerships that the poor lose out. This was the case in the Philippine capital Manila, which had the largest international showcase project for private business involvement in the water sector. Water supplies to households did get better, but water rates soared by up to 89 percent, depending on the neighbourhood – far too much for poor residents.

Helvetas considers that private-sector involvement is one possible way of fulfilling the human right to clean water, but only under specific conditions:

- **If the users are sufficiently well-informed about the contractual arrangements between the companies and the authorities, and play a part in defining them;**
- **If all actors respect the principles of good governance, public accountability and democracy;**
- **If the overall supervision of the water system remains in public hands.**

WATER RATES TO PAY FOR UPKEEP

How much should water cost?

Just because access to affordable water is a human right does not mean that the resource should be free or that everybody may demand a full swimming pool. If a water supply is to be genuinely sustainable, then the community itself has to cover the costs of building, running and maintaining the system through water rates and/or taxes. The current debate on sustainable water supply is increasingly focussing on the efficient use of water.



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Partnership. In the small town of Ancuabe in northern Mozambique, a small private business is responsible for the upkeep of the water network.

Helvetas considers water an essential human right. Since it was founded, Helvetas has enabled countless people to dig wells, harness springs and manage the upkeep by themselves. In its work with local communities in the South, Helvetas always argues that users should pay a small fee for water to assure sustainability of the systems. However, anybody not in a position to pay this still has the right to 25 litres of clean water per day and per person and adequate subsidy mechanisms have to be put in place. Consumers and authorities must also do everything they can to save water and to protect it from contamination, so that future generations may continue to enjoy this resource.



Water money. Louise Beneche, treasurer of the Bastin village water committee in Haiti, collects water fees.

WATER GRABBING

Who wins and who loses?

There are three main kinds of water-grabbing:

- Rivers are diverted and springs sequestered;
- Large plantations, industrial complexes and mines pollute the water of an entire region;
- Private, state and parastatal actors acquire large tracts of land along with the respective water rights.

Actors often resort to underhand tactics such as corruption or forced expulsions to cultivate large areas of irrigation-intensive crops or biofuels. Even consumers who would otherwise reject such practices are supporting land and water grabbing if they buy such products.

Whether it is used for irrigation or in the household, water belongs to us all. Water rights may only be sold or leased out:

- If the process is open and transparent, and every person may decide freely whether to grant a concession and to whom;
- If local people derive appropriate benefits, and the transaction enables them to improve their standard of living;
- If the arrangement leaves water of sufficient quantity and quality to guarantee the local population's human right to water, safeguard the ecosystem, and if any wastewater is purified.

Wherever these conditions are not satisfied, Helvetas condemns the allocation of water rights as water-grabbing and as breach of local people's human right to water and food security. As only a strong civil society can defend local people's claims, Helvetas lays emphasis in all its water projects on strengthening stakeholders' rights and training them to participate in democratic debate. Helvetas also helps communities and authorities to draw up fair plans for integrated water management.



An alternative. SODIS (here in San Pedro de Buenavista in Bolivia) is a cheap and simple process that purifies water using sunlight and plastic bottles.

BOTTLED WATER

Expensive hygiene

In many countries around the world, bottled water is a part of everyday life – not only among the privileged classes, but also in poorer households. 138 billion litres of bottled water were bought in 2013, which amounts to 22 litres per capita (source: Greenpeace). The market is experiencing double-digit growth in countries like China and India.

The industry, led by Swiss company Nestlé, the world's largest producer, comes in for a great deal of criticism, because of the negative effects on water resources in certain regions, because of the energy it consumes, and because of inadequate disposal arrangements for the plastic bottles. Yet it is the social impact of the bottled-water boom that is most shocking, for political will to maintain a safe yet costly public water network is reduced when the middle and upper classes can easily afford hygienic, pure bottled water. The result, though, is that those who cannot afford bottled water have no access to clean water.

Helvetas respects the individual's right to drink bottled water. Yet water concessions granted to its producers must obey the same rules as other water concessions:

- **Contracts are transparent and respect all residents' human right to water;**
- **Water concessions are part of an integrated Water Use Master Plan at the basin level;**
- **The state may revoke the contracts at any time;**
- **Companies guarantee that their production and transport operations will respect labour rights and protect the environment. They also promise to promote access to water for those who cannot afford bottled water.**

HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation