



## Declaration of the WATERLAT-GOBACIT Network for World Water Day, 22 March 2019

### “Water, rights, and utopias: priorities in the process of democratization of water politics”

The title of our Declaration corresponds to the central theme of the IX International Meeting of our Network, which took place last September in the city of Joao Pessoa, State of Paraiba, Brazil (<http://waterlat.org/meetings/public-meetings/waterlat-gobacit-ix-2018/>). The activities that took place at the Meeting reflected the efforts and preoccupations of the members of our Network, located in over 30 countries of Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europa, as well as the efforts and preoccupations of millions of human beings. The title of the Meeting had the objective to highlight the priorities that we confront in the process of democratization of the **Politics of water**, priorities that are highly pertinent to propose reflexions that are urgently needed. We write “Politics” in capital letters to emphasise the need to recover the concept of politics in its higher, **substantive** meaning, to avoid its reduction to particular forms such as electoral politics or public policies, or to the practices that systematically erode the credibility and legitimacy of Politics, such as the ethical, intellectual and material corruption characterizing the behaviour of substantial sectors of the elites that occupy political and administrative posts, civil or military positions of authority or hold economic and financial power. This erosion and devaluation of **Politics** is both the result and a cause of the **instrumentalization of democracy**, whose function has been subordinated to the interests of the dominant social classes and sectors in our societies. One the gravest consequences of this has been the **worldwide deepening of structural extreme inequalities and injustices**, as indicated by recent studies showing that, since the early 1980s, 1% of the world’s high-income population has accumulated the same level of wealth than the poorest 50%. This extreme deepening of inequalities and injustices, with a **monopolistic accumulation of social power and wealth by a minuscule global elite**, is produced and justified in the name of a **democracy plentiful in the enunciation of formal rights but increasingly devoid of actual mechanisms** that may allow human beings to achieve a full exercise of their rights. Moreover, many rights that had been conquered during earlier democratization processes have been **restricted or cancelled altogether**. In many countries, including those capitalist countries historically considered as models of democracy, to **fully exercise citizenship rights has been increasingly turned into a risky venture**, very often with dire consequences, including death. **The democracy of “the possible”** allows the actors holding social, economic-financial and political power to justify the cutting back or cancellation of rights and to sanction the deepening of the dispossession of our goods and resources **and the strengthening of social forms characterized by extreme levels of inhumanity**. The **inequality and injustice in the control, government, and distribution of water and of the benefits, risks, and threats connected with water** are a key component of these processes, and their consequences have a decisive impact on the consolidation and expansion of **increasingly inhuman forms of social organization**.

We believe that, in the current situation, the attempt to fully exercise the **rights to a share of the levels of social development achieved by human societies**, even in the traditional capitalist democracies, seems to **have been turned into a utopia**. In this context, we understand **utopia as a social territory** that for large majorities has always been distant, unattainable, a forbidden land. The

extreme deepening of inequalities and injustices has exacerbated this situation, given that the historically excluded and marginalized social groups have been joined by large social sectors that had managed to improve their living conditions but have suffered a rapid deterioration of their situation. The consolidation of **increasingly inhuman social forms** has placed a substantial proportion of the human population in **conditions of worsening vulnerability and defencelessness**. Simultaneously, their rights to defend the basic conditions required for dignified life are systematically cut back and cancelled, often in violent and brutal fashion, in the name of democracy or, at least, through the instrumentalization of democracy for the service of particular interests. The **concept of utopia** inspiring this Declaration refers to the **conquest of that social territory always unattainable** for large majorities in our societies. Even those sectors that had managed to gain entry to this territory during historical periods more favourable to the advance of substantive, material democracy are now been expelled from it. **Utopia, understood as the rejection** of the notion that the universal access to the basic conditions of wellbeing that may guarantee a dignified life **would be an impossibility**, even in the traditional capitalist democracies. The **utopia of creating societies grounded on the principles of equality, inclusion, and human dignity**, able to sustain **substantive**, not merely formal **democracies**. The utopia formally acknowledged in the 2030 Sustainable Development Objectives that seek to guarantee **universal access to water and to the essential services connected with this common good**. Regrettably, the indicators suggest that **this utopia is rapidly moving away from the grasp of the large majorities** of the human population, that, once again, the good intentions will end in an **announced failure**, and that these objectives **will not be achieved**. It is urgent that the debates and actions are centred on the **causes of the problem**, but regrettably these are not addressed, because it would require **uncovering the ethical intellectual and material corruption characterizing our dominant social order**.

The research results, the information, the evidence, the denunciations, the alternatives and proposals that were presented and debated in the different sessions that took place at the Network's IX Meeting, confirm the aggravation of the situations of **inequality and injustice in the control, government, and distribution of water and of the benefits, risks, and threats connected with water** globally. These presentations and debates were performed by academics, students, representatives of public utilities, workers unions, social movements, and other actors representing the **social universe to which we have committed the work of our Network**. In the name of this commitment with the struggles for **more humane and just social orders**, in which the need to "guarantee" the right to water would become unthinkable, as if caring for and sharing water were not integral to the existence of the species, we publish this Declaration.

- **We denounce the systematic violation** of the fundamental rights of the people, including the Human Right to Water, by governments and private companies, as well as other actors holding social, political, and economic-financial power. This violation takes places in a diversity of forms, from the **appropriation, often violent, of water sources**, the **commodification and privatization** of water and water-based services, the **pollution of water by poorly regulated, non-regulated or even illegal** activities, including agribusinesses, mining, fracking, illicit monocrops, and other extractivist activities that severely affect ecosystems and living beings. It also takes place through the **inhumanity demonstrated by governments in the lack of prevention, protection and attention to the populations affected by water-related disasters**, droughts, floods, and extreme phenomena including water-related diseases, the **failure to comply with the internationally agreed targets to expand access to essential water and sanitation services and hygiene**, among many other grave problems affecting particularly the most disadvantaged sectors of the population. In this regard, **we denounce the dominant politics of water in relation to essential water and sanitation services that seriously endanger the possibility to meet the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals**, which include the universalization of access to water, sanitation and hygiene. There is little more than a

decade to achieve these Objectives, and it is **highly likely that**, as in the case of 2015 Millennium Development Goals, **we will fail again. Responsibility for these failures is fundamentally associated with the dominant politics of water**, promoted by governments and international development and financial institutions, jointly with their private-sector allies.

- **We demand that governments and international institutions**, in particular those departments that are relevant to the Politics and management of water in the United Nations, take seriously their responsibilities and commitments, adopting clear, unambiguous positions, **expressing condemnation of the violations and taking all necessary steps** to protect populations and guarantee their exercise of the right to a healthy environment, to the cleaning and maintenance of water sources, and to the access to services that are essential for dignified life. We also **demand that governments and international institutions abandon the failed policies of commodification and privatization** of water sources and essential water services, and that take on the **defence of public and common forms of ownership and management** of water and water services, in their different forms. This also includes **stopping their support for public-private partnerships**, which hide the massive transfer of public resources to private companies, a **failed model** that has caused **enormous losses and debts** for countries, which fall on the most disadvantaged sectors of the population. In their place, governments and international institutions should promote and support forms of public-public, public-community, and community-community association and cooperation, among other, which must be **subject to effective democratic control** by the population.
- **We demand that the governments of Latin America and the Caribbean ratify the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean** (Escazú Agreement). Among other issues, this agreement seeks to provide protection to communities, environmental leaders and activists, among other actors involved in the defence of the right to a safe environment and of human rights more generally. This important agreement, adopted on 4 March 2018, **requires the ratification of at least 11 countries, but to date no country has ratified it.**

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