The Campaign Against Water Privatisation in Italy:
Democratising Water from Below

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Summary

- National context
- Demands of the campaign
- Origin of the campaign
- The long, winding road to success
- Reflections
National Context

- 1994 Galli Law: Introduced full cost recovery but does not require privatisation, nor liberalisation

- Budget Laws, 2002-2009: Required compulsory competitive tendering/partial privatisation of water operators

- Impact of legislation, 1994 to date: Considerable growth of private operations, accompanied by increasing controversy
Demands of the campaign

- To outlaw water privatisation
- To outlaw profit making in the water sector
- To remunicipalise water operations
- Paradigm switch in water services: From the market to public participation
Origin of the campaign

2005: Trade unions, NGOs and civic associations establish horizontal network to mobilise against Bolkenstein Directive (at European and Italian level) - Stop Bolkenstein! campaign

2006-2007: Trade unions, NGOs and civic associations establish the Italian Forum of Water Movements; proposed law on water remunicipalisation, supported by 406,000 signatures (above the required 50,000); 40,000-strong demonstration

2008-2009: Fall of the Prodi government; Forum requests the Berlusconi governments to enact water remunicipalisation, without success; Strategic decision to promote referendum
The long, winding road to success

- **April-July 2010**: 1,400,000 signatures collected to request the referendum against water privatisation (above the minimum 500,000 required)

- **The campaign motto**: It is written water but reads democracy!

- **12-13 June 2011**: More than 27.6 million Italians vote, 95% of them against water privatisation
Reflections on the coalition

- A grassroots, diffused, transversal and bottom-up campaign – with no formal backing from major political parties
- The usual suspects, but most were without prior campaigning experience (sensitised citizens)
- Trade unions, NGOs, civic associations, some local authorities and public water companies, missionaries, parishes, artists, legal experts, minor political parties... plus allies
Reflections on mobilisation strategy

- New media (internet, Facebook)
- Peer sensitisation (door to door, but mostly informal)
- Numbers do matter for message diffusion: mobilisation strategies adapted accordingly (from conventional to inclusive tactics, suitable for the novice)
- Numbers do matter for strategy: forum switching from mass demonstrations to proposed law and referendum
Reflections on allies and opponents

**Allies:** Controversial role of some political parties; the Vatican and the Catholic Church; a minority of the media (with some late conversions)

**Opponents:** Berlusconi government (who did its utmost to discourage turnout); reticent state media; private and commercialised water companies
The democratising power of water

- Water as a common good (thus publicly owned and managed) as catalyst for transversal mobilisation and social support
- Democracy from below to repossess water as a public service, under a new paradigm
- Water’s democratising power revived what was a moribund instrument of direct democracy