



**Document of the WATERLAT-GOBACIT Network  
for the Alternative World Water Forum (FAMA): “Water is a right,  
not a commodity”**

**Brasilia, 17-22 March 2018**

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The document has three parts:

- 1) A short introductory retrospective
- 2) A Public Declaration of the WATERLAT-GOBACIT Network
- 3) A list of publications freely available, relevant to the event



## Short retrospective

After the organization of 8 World Water Forums, including the 2018 edition that takes place in Brasilia on 18-23 March, and with hindsight looking back at the time elapsed since the first WWF held in Marrakesh in 1997, it is possible to have some clarity about some significant themes. The first edition of the WWF took place at the **time of maximum global expansion of the neoliberal reforms** characterized by de- and re-regulation, liberalization and privatization of essential public services. This was the time when these reforms were being pushed by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the regional development banks, like the Inter-American Development Bank, and the aid agencies of central countries, among other key institutions. The key strategy was to promote private sector participation in the provision of water-based services, mainly through a few business groups that monopolized the sector at the international level. Among other arguments used at the time, it was asserted that **reducing the role of the State** in the provision of these services and to **transfer these activities to private companies**, which supposedly would make the investments that the State was unable to finance, would “improve the efficiency of infrastructure services, extend their delivery to the poor, and relieve pressure on public budgets that have long been the only source of infrastructure finance (World Bank, 1998: 1). We must remember too that officers who had responsibility for these themes in institutions like the World Bank were arguing in favour of “unregulated private monopolies” to solve the problems caused by lack of essential water services in poor countries (Brook Cowen and Cowen, 1998: 22–23). Leaflets produced by the World Bank to boost “private participation” argued that people had been historically misled by governments in earlier times to believe that water and sanitation services were “a ‘public service’ or even a ‘social good’”, wrong ideas that had to be eradicated, as the provision of these services should be **commodified and left in the hands of private providers** (WSP-PPIAF, 2002: 8–10). The list of examples that could be given about this promotion given to the **implementation of the neoliberal creed** in the water sector at the time when the series of WWFs started would be very long, but surely unnecessary, at least to those who are acquainted with the recent history of these processes.

Since that period of privatist neoliberal euphoria a lot of water has flowed under the bridges. These policies would soon lead many countries to experience harsh failures, notably in Latin America, the region that had become the experimental field for their implementation. Among the first significant failures that were recorded it is worth mentioning the case of the private concession granted to provide water and sanitation services in the city of Aguascalientes, Mexico, in 1993. This was the first experience of implementation of these policies in Mexico. Only one year after the contract started, and owing to the 1994 financial crisis in Mexico, **the State had to step in and rescue the**

**private company from collapse. From that point, the State took back the responsibility for the required infrastructure investments**, although according to the original contract this should have been a responsibility of the concessionaire (Torregrosa et. al., 2016). Another noticeable case, though much less discussed, was the private concession granted in 1995 to deliver water and sanitation services in the Province of Tucuman, Argentina. Because of several conflicts caused by a steep tariff increase and poor service quality that led to a movement of civil resistance with 86% of the users refusing to pay the water bills, the private company abandoned the concession in 1997 (Crenzel, 2014). These two experiences will be joined later by many other cases, including some that created headlines given their significant impact, such as the 2000 Water War in Cochabamba, Bolivia, or the cancellation of the concessions contracts in the city of Buenos Aires and in Santa Fe Province, Argentina, in 2006, among many others.

In some ways, 2006 is a year with important symbolic value, not just because of the collapse of private concessions like Buenos Aires', which had been used as a flagship by the World Bank and other institutions to promote these policies. In addition to that, in 2006 was organized the fourth edition of the World Water Forum in Mexico City. Among other topics, it is worth highlighting two events that happened in this Forum. Firstly, the representative of the World Bank at the Forum, Katherine Sierra, stated that in the 1990s in the Bank they had "come to believe" that the private sector would make investments, but that **this had not happened and that the fact is that always most investments must be made by the State** (Sierra, 2006). This statement, which does not seem to have had much resonance in the Forum, was in fact part of a series of public statements made by officers of the international development and financial institutions, but also by the CEOs of the multinational water companies involved, recognize the **failure of the neoliberal policies promoting the privatization of water and sanitation services**. There is a wealth of literature on this subject. One of the first declarations in this regard was made by the World Bank itself in the 2004 World Development Report, where it could be read that "private sector or NGO participation in health, education, and infrastructure is not without problems -especially in reaching poor people" (World Bank, 2003: 11). The second important event worth highlighting from the 2006 WWF is the participation of President Evo Morales, who had taken the presidency of Bolivia a few months earlier, in January. Evo Morales joined the long list of voices that had been participating in the **struggle to get the United Nations to declare that the access to water is a universal human right**. No doubt, the Bolivian initiative announced at the 2006 WWF was boosted by the symbolic power associated with the arrival of the first indigenous president of Latin America. Moreover, conspicuous members of the new Bolivian government had been leaders in the famous Water Wars of Cochabamba (2000) and La Paz-El Alto (2006), and all these issues contributed to give a new life to the debate about the Human Right to Water in the United Nations, with the support of some allied countries in this topic, specially Ecuador and Uruguay.

As we know, eventually the United Nations approved the existence of the Human Right to Water in July 2010, even if it happened despite **the abstention or absence of 70 countries, around 36% of the total number countries**, including the more

powerful and influential, which did not support the approval of the Human Right to Water at the UN. Also, it must be remarked that the approval of the existence of this right, neither guarantees that the policies and mechanisms necessary for its materialization will be implemented nor would stop the commodification and privatization of essential water services or the pollution of water sources. It is unsurprising, in this context, that despite the official celebrations, and without detracting from the important achievements of many countries, **in practice the targets for the water sector that had been committed as part of the Millennium Development Goals, reducing by half the proportion of the world population with access to essential services by 2015, were not accomplished, unless we remain on the surface of this matter.** Just in quantitative terms, the official reports show that 45 countries, 23.4 per cent of a total of 192 countries, did not achieve the target of reducing by half the proportion of the population lacking access to “improved” water sources, that is, we are not even talking of drinkable water. We know that the situation is even direr in relation to sanitation services, as only 95 countries, 49.4 per cent of the total, achieved the target of reducing by half the proportion of the population lacking access to adequate sanitary infrastructure. In Latin America, officially 11 countries, half of the total, did not achieve the target for water and 19, the majority, failed to meet the sanitation target. Nevertheless, **nobody is deceived about the fact that the reality of the situation is far from what the official figures suggest, as many countries that officially would have met the targets have enormous problems, owing to the substandard quality of the water distributed for consumption.**

In the year 2015 the new Sustainable Development Objectives were approved, replacing the Millennium Development Objectives. The new objectives are much more ambitious and, in this sense, they are welcome, as in principle they restate a universalist agenda that had been abandoned since the 1990s. Now, rather than “reducing by half” the proportion of the population lacking access to the services, the target is to “achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water [...] sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation” by 2030 (UN, 2015: 18). However, the question is, **will it be possible to meet these universalist targets by 2030, just little over a decade from now, without changing the dominant policies and practices that not only continue to be inspired by the neoliberal framework but are also being exacerbated through an aggressive and arrogant return to the privatist politics that had already failed us before?**

The advance of these privatist politics, in an arrogant and aggressive fashion, takes place **even though the evidence of their failure keeps mounting.** In recent weeks before this document was written, finally we can see an almost uncontested recognition of the **resounding failure** of one of the models of privatization of public services that had been deemed -and continues to be considered by many of the institutions that organize the WWF series- as the example to be followed. We refer here to the model of privatization of water and sanitation services implemented by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom in 1989, which was later reinforced with the model of Public-Private Partnerships, also designed in the United Kingdom and later spread internationally. When even the speakers of international financial capital, as the British newspaper The Financial Times, publish articles titled “The UK water

regime calls out for change. Insufficient competition has bred a lack of accountability” (21 September 2017), the situation has reached a point of no return. Another British publication stated it more clearly: “The scandal of privatised water is going to blow. Water firms promised efficiency. Instead they have brought unsustainable debt that the public will have to redeem” (The Spectator, 16 September 2017). The news about the explosion of this scandal continue to pile up, with the collapse of the large private companies that incarnated the model of Public-Private Partnerships, among other issues. Even ministers from the current Conservative UK government, a defender of the privatization politics initiated by Margaret Thatcher, have come out to openly denounce the corruption and failure of the system. For example, earlier this month the Environment Minister, Michael Gove, speaking to the CEOs of the UK private water and sanitation companies, stated:

Far too often, there is evidence that water companies – your water companies – have not been acting sufficiently in the public interest. Some companies have been playing the system for the benefit of wealthy managers and owners, at the expense of consumers and the environment (The Guardian, 1 March 2018).

We believe that **it will be very difficult to find an open debate, even a debate at all, about this and related topics at the 8<sup>th</sup> World Water Forum** and similar events. The relevance and urgency of this debate, and other debates related to water that have similar urgency or even greater, should mean that these **be given the highest priority, because the same failed policies are being implemented massively in many countries, notably in Brazil, that the host country of the 8<sup>th</sup> World Water Forum**. No doubt, we have strong reasons to think that it will be very difficult to achieve the new Sustainable Development Goals, **unless there is a definitive turn around in the politics and the practices**, something that looks improbable in the short run.

Although this grave problem associated with the imposition of the privatist neoliberal model in the sector of essential water services has foremost importance, it is just **one of the many problems that we confront** in relation to the challenges faced by the government and management of water and essential water services, which are unlikely to receive an adequate, open, participative treatment at the 8<sup>th</sup> World Water Forum. In this connection, the theme of our Alternative World Water Forum focuses our attention on a central problem: **the struggle against the process of commodification** of the access and distribution of water for human uses and the **recognition that its access should be considered an unalienable right**, given that **water is a common good** and that water-based services that are essential for life must be considered also **common goods, public goods, social goods**, to which **all human beings have an unalienable right**. This central theme is related to one of the many aspects related to water that keep our attention. In our Network, this position to reject commodification and defend the right to water has a key place, and we have a Thematic Area dedicated to the subject: Thematic Area 3, The Urban Water Cycle and Essential Public Services, including rural areas (<http://waterlat.org/thematic-areas/ta3/>). But the process of commodification and debate about the right to water **cut across many other aspects**

**related to the government and management of water**, while, in turn, the activities of water government and management largely exceed the specific topic of water and sanitation services for human consumption. Although our Network covers only some of these many aspects, it does follow up several questions of great urgency and relevance, including:

- The tensions, contradictions and confrontations characterizing the **production of knowledge about water**, both within the scientific field and in the interaction between scientific knowledge and other forms of knowing, from technical to popular knowledge (Thematic Area, X-disciplinarity in Research and Action over water - <http://waterlat.org/thematic-areas/ta1/>)
- The **social and ecological impact of large water infrastructures**, of large-scale mining, and extensive agri-businesses (Thematic Area 2, Water and Megaprojects - <http://waterlat.org/thematic-areas/ta2/>)
- Issues related to intra and international **transboundary waters** (Thematic Area 4, Transboundary Waters - <http://waterlat.org/es/areas-tematicas/at4/>)
- The relationship between water government and management and the **processes of health-disease** (Thematic Area 5, Water and Health - <http://waterlat.org/thematic-areas/ta5/>)
- The **production of hidrosocial spaces and territories** (Thematic Area 6, Basins, territories and hidrosocial spaces - <http://waterlat.org/thematic-areas/ta6/>)
- The role of **artistic and cultural production**, and of the activities of **communication and education** in relation to water (Thematic Area 7, Art, Communication, Culture and Education <http://waterlat.org/thematic-areas/ta7/>)
- The relation between water government and management in the **generation and response to risks and disasters** (Thematic Area 8, Water and disasters - <http://waterlat.org/thematic-areas/ta8/>)
- The **forms of violence exercised particularly against human populations** and against **those who take on the defence** of water sources, the right to water, and struggle against the commodification and different forms of appropriation and destruction of these sources (Thematic Area 10, Water and Violence - <http://waterlat.org/thematic-areas/ta10/>)

It is possible to address these and other topics related to water from multiple perspectives, including the perspectives that tend to be predominant in the programmes of the official WWF series, organized regularly by governments, multinational companies and international development and financial institutions, that constitute the focus of attention of the Alternative Forum. However, it is enough to look at the programme of the official 8th WWF to identify the existence of silences (perhaps silencing), that is, themes that are not treated, as well as the **prevalence of interests that do not reflect the needs and preferences of the great majorities** in the prevailing approaches applied to the themes included in the debates (<http://www.worldwaterforum8.org/>). This is not the moment to make an objective

criticism of the debates of the official 8th WWF, as they have not yet happened, but **considering the history of the series of WWFs organized to date, it becomes clear that there is a need to organize an Alternative World Water Forum**, as it has happened before, given that this is **the only way to ensure that themes that are normally excluded and silenced in the official WWFs are discussed**.

In relation to this, the WATERLAT-GOBACIT Network has been making a series of public declarations that reflect its position on several themes that deserve priority given their urgency. In the following part, we reproduce an updated version of sections of previous declarations, which also make a reference among other issues to the official WWF. Our objective is contributing to making strongly visible some of the preoccupations that concern us and that we wish to share at the Alternative World Water Forum, in a constructive but also admonitory message about the challenges that we unavoidably face.

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## PUBLIC DECLARATION

The relationship between **structural social inequalities**, water control, and the accumulation of social power in its diverse manifestations, cultural, economic, epistemic, political power, etc., is a fact that has been firmly established by a long-standing tradition in the social sciences dating back at least to the XVIII Century. Regrettably, our vast knowledge of this topic, and particularly of the concrete mechanisms that account for the processes of **production of inequality and injustice in relation to the access to and the control of water** in their various aspects has not been translated in a greater capacity of human societies to reverse these processes and replace them by more egalitarian, rational and democratic social forms of relating to water and, through water, with the other species and the rest of nature.

In fact, the growing evidence suggests that, in relation to the politics and management of water, we are witnessing a stage of **deepening and acceleration of the processes of accumulation of social power grounded on the structurally unequal control of water at world level**. This finds expression, among other issues, in the artificial production of scarcity, in the advance of the commodification of water and water-based services, in the anthropogenic generation of diverse kinds of disasters related to water management issues and their negative consequences that time and again affect the most vulnerable sectors, in the forced or induced displacement of whole populations subject to the expropriation or spoiling –for different reasons– of their water sources, among many other problems of high social relevance. In Latin America and the Caribbean, these processes take place in a context where the regional economies' subordination to the model based on primary exports is being deepened, which includes the re-primarization of those economies that in recent decades had achieved some degree of diversification. In this regard, since 1990s the region has become a large experimental field for the **advance of extractivist activities, including large-scale open cast mining, transgenic and mono-cropping agriculture with their associated technological packages of monopolization of seed production and agrochemicals (often termed agrotoxics owing to their socio-ecological impact) and the massive construction of large infrastructure works**, among other crucial topics.

On the one hand, the processes of production and reproduction of structural inequalities in relation to the control and access to water sources and to water-related services are often manifested, clearly visible, very often in a brutal fashion. This happens, for example, through the diversion of rivers depriving human populations of their water sources to deliver water to extractivist projects such as large-scale mining or the production of hydrocarbons through technologies of hydraulic fracturing (fracking). It also happens through the construction of massive infrastructures, too often without consultation, without properly considering social and ecological impacts, which produce profound transformations in our societies and that are implemented in

the absence of adequate democratic controls. An example in Central America and Mexico is the Mesoamerican Integration and Development Project (MIDP) (previously known as Puebla-Panama Plan), and in the South the Initiative for the Integration of the Regional Infrastructure of South America (IIRSA).

It also happens through the **elimination of public policies predicated on the notion of social rights and their replacement with policies that seek to convert water into a commodity**, for instance through the privatization and mercantilization of essential water and sanitation services in cities, just to mention some conspicuous examples. However, and to a significant extent, the production and reproduction of inequalities has been historically consolidated in ways that tend to be unseen and that too often have been internalized, even naturalized by human populations, such as in the example of unequal water rationing or the unacceptable quality of the water distributed for human consumption affecting large sectors of the population, which have a **disproportionate negative impact on the most vulnerable sectors**.

In this connection, **the implicit or even explicit role of the production of scientific knowledge in the invisibilization, when not the justification or naturalization of structural inequality** in relation to water is also a fundamental factor in these processes. For example, we have the case of scientists, when not even whole departments and even disciplines, entirely dedicated to the role of **organic intellectuals of the process of monopolization of water sources and water-related services. It is a case of science at the service of private capital accumulation** rather than contributing to the socially equitable distribution of the benefits derived from the uses of water and of the protection against the threat and dangers associated with water, be it disasters, epidemics, and other phenomena that regularly affect human populations.

Also, it must be highlighted the prevailing reductionisms and determinisms, particularly though not only in the techno-scientific disciplines, which continue to pose obstacles to the process of re-integration of knowledge and the development of higher levels of interdisciplinary coordination that may allow us to render observable the **interrelations between the processes of production and reproduction of structural inequality in relation to water and their manifestations in the form of poverty, destitution, vulnerability, defenselessness, marginality, and exclusion**, among other relevant aspects. The weight of techno-centric determinism and reductionism is strongly manifested, for example, in the **direction given to scientific policy internationally and in the formulation of public policies**. As an example, it can be mentioned the meagre concrete results of the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 21) that took place in Paris, which beyond the excellent declarations of good will tended to consolidate the promotion of techno-centric and mercantilistic solutions, while the decisions taken regarding the actions needed to reduce global warming were limited to statements of good intentions that are not binding for the signatory countries. This has potentially grave consequences for many regions, given the growing catastrophic impacts of climate change, with the intensification of diverse processes such as changes in the rainfall regimes, in the temperature patterns, in the regularity and intensity of extreme climatic events, or in the rise of the sea level, which have a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable

sectors. Regrettably too, for many scientists, including many in the progressive political camp, the disciplinary enclosures and reductionisms often constitute sanctuaries, comfort zones, which become **epistemic traps and, given the resulting social consequences, political traps, that pose formidable obstacles to the advance of forms of knowledge that can have liberating effects, that may allow the advancements towards the development of more egalitarian social forms.**

In this regard, we must highlight the scientificist reductionism and determinism that devalue, when not directly **reject, the possibility of the dialogue of knowledge and transdisciplinarity**, as it clings on an elitist and conservative understanding of science and imposes a hierarchical, exclusionary approach to the process of knowledge production that denies the need to promote the co-production of knowledge involving non-scientific actors, especially in relation to the social groups most affected by the inequalities and injustices related with the control and management of water in their different forms. This **elitist understanding of science**, even in those cases where it takes benign, paternalistic, even nominally progressive forms, constitutes a formidable **epistemological and political obstacle for the development of more egalitarian and democratic social forms and contributes to the production and reproduction of structural inequalities** in this field.

Historically, the processes that produce and reproduce structural inequalities in relation to the control and the access to water have been the **source of social conflicts and struggles**, often leading to processes of cooperation and democratization of water management, but very often too ending in the deepening of the **forms of monopolistic accumulation of social power and the expropriation of the material living conditions of vast majorities of human beings**, including the tacit, when not explicit, negation of the few daily litres of clean water needed for a modicum of dignified life. The discussion of these and other problems related to water, and particularly of the processes and social actors involved in the accumulation of power in relation to the control and management of water and water-related services **very seldom finds space in the public debate, and when it does there is a tendency to marginalize and postpone** it in one way or another.

In fact, the attempt to bring this debate into the public domain, an attempt often led by the affected populations and by solidary actors such as social movements, diverse types of civil organizations (NGOs, user and consumer groups), labour unions, committed academics, socially sensitive political representatives, among others, too often becomes a risky endeavour, subject to intimidation, verbal and physical aggression, in a prevailing context of great impunity. This is often expressed in the **systematic criminalization, repression and, in the extreme, assassination of those who participate in the struggle to stop and reverse these inequalities and injustices**. In Latin America, especially in Brazil, Colombia, Honduras and Mexico, we have some of the regions in the world where these processes take place with much intensity, as crudely illustrated by the assassination of dozens of environmental activists, committed academics, journalists, labour unionists, and community leaders involved in the defence of water and water services in the region. This is one the **most important threats confronting the democratization process in our countries**. These examples are, regrettably, the tip of the iceberg of a structural situation, which is

obviously not limited to Latin America but is rather also present in different forms and to different extents in many other regions.

### **Therefore**

We denounce the use of violence by states, in connivance with other actors, related to various aspects of the politics and management of water, that as recently demonstrated by reports from international organizations, too often is an intentional and systematic practice deployed against activists, labour union members, human rights advocates, academics, students, journalists, communities and groups that resist the dispossession of their territories. The use of violence to silence denunciations against water-related impacts and injustices committed by States and other power holders in their territories constitutes a pattern in Latin America and other regions, which reveals the web of political and economic interests seeking to control water sources and the management of water services. The resulting elevated levels of violence produce, de facto, a sort of “low-intensity war” against the populations resisting these dispossessions.

We demand that governments, multinational corporations, including their different representations such as the World Economic Forum and the World Water Forum, international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the regional development banks, and the institutions of the United Nations linked to the government and management of water, as well as other relevant actors, **to stop actively promoting and financing the politics of privatization and commodification of the management of water sources and water and sanitation services**, as these politics are responsible for much of the violence affecting the activities of water use, consumption and distribution.

We also demand a **struggle against private-public corruption**, manifested in many ways in the water and water services sector. We need to transform the dominant perception that has been created by institutions and governments that defend a privatist and mercantilist water politics according to which corruption would be essentially the preserve of the public sector. This vision has contributed to discrediting public institutions and Politics more generally. It is crucial to demonstrate that **corruption is endemic in the relations between the State and private actors**, and that it is often promoted by the same national and international actors that raise their accusing finger against public corruption, such as the international financial institutions and the governments of central countries that monopolize the production of “rankings” of transparency and corruption.

We also demand **the promotion and consolidation of public-public, public-community, and community-community alliances and associations**, and to develop other forms as it may be needed, to strengthen the struggles against the threats facing the process of democratization of water politics and management. It is crucial to conceive and strengthen innovative models of water politics and management that **prioritize inter-sector practices that can break with the dominant techno-centric**

**approaches, that must be framed by principles of democratic public policy making, with mid and long-term planning, with effective and not merely formal social participation, and with democratic control.** These models must promote public management and include mechanisms to prevent the use of public institutions as a cover for the process of mercantilization and private profiteering, such as “public-private partnerships” (PPPs) or the transfer of shares of public utilities to private investors, among other forms.

We also demand that governments and other power holders **must abandon the ongoing attempts to subordinate the production of scientific knowledge over water to the pursuit of private wealth accumulation.** On the contrary, what is required is to **guarantee the autonomy of the scientific community in the production of knowledge, and the provision of adequate funding** to support public research and teaching institutions to achieve their objectives in the production of knowledge that is oriented to contribute towards the **construction of egalitarian, inclusionary, and democratic societies**, where water politics and management be subordinated to the social distribution of wealth, including water wealth, and to guaranteeing the wellbeing and sustainability of ecosystems, living beings, and human societies.

Finally, we demand that governments, multinational companies, and other actors involved in the process, **must immediately clarify the diverse crimes** committed against activists, labour union members, human rights advocates, academics, students, journalists, and communities and groups that resist the dispossession of their waters and territories. The clarification **must be followed by the corresponding punishment to the material and intellectual authors of these crimes.** We demand that states **must guarantee the right to protest and other legitimate actions** oriented at protecting water sources and the material living conditions of human populations. States **must also provide the necessary protection to stop these systematic processes of repression, persecution, and assassination.**

WATERLAT-GOBACIT Network, Brasilia, 9 March 2018



## SELECTION OF PUBLICATIONS OF THE WATERLAT-GOBACIT NETWORK FREELY AVAILABLE

### Books

José Esteban Castro, Léo Heller, y María da Piedade Morais (Eds.), The Right to Water as Public Policy in Latin America: a Theoretical and Empirical Exploration (in Portuguese), 2015. Available at: <http://waterlat.org/es/publicaciones/libros/libro-o-direito-a-agua/>.

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### WATERLAT-GOBACIT Network Working Papers:

Norma Valencio (Ed.), "Troubled waters: the social construction of disasters in different national contexts" (in Portuguese and Spanish), Vol. 3, No 1, 2016. Available at: <http://waterlat.org/WPapers/WPSATAD31.pdf>.

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Karina Kloster (Ed.), Water conflicts, violence, and capitalist territorialisation in Latin America (articles in Spanish), Vol. 4, No 4, 2017. Available at: <http://waterlat.org/WPapers/WGWPVol4No4.pdf>.

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