



## THE BLUE COMMUNITIES IN LATIN AMERICA. RECOGNIZING THE RESISTANCE OF ORGANIZED COMMUNITIES

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As the commodification and commercialization of water advances, our resistance and proposals are recreated. Water, always wandering, has been conceived by all cultures as a common good - which also influences our family, community and collective life. Vandana Shiva introduces her text, *Water Wars*<sup>1</sup>, with a clear affirmation of its essence and attributes: “water is the matrix of culture, the sustainer of life”. Water is essential in the construction of community and popular networks that build the common good in self-managed forms of appropriating water and territory. With water, they establish themselves autonomously and achieve solidarity and communal bonds. Municipalities are fighting to recover or maintain public ownership of water and basic sanitation services, defending the public sector and reappropriating public assets from the perspective of guaranteeing access to and supply of water and basic sanitation (from a rights-based perspective).

The *Blue Gold*<sup>2</sup>, a book published in 2002, shows us the freshwater crisis and highlights a global crisis threatening the survival of

life on the planet. Water, conceived as a common heritage of humanity, like other areas and common goods, has been subject to commercialization, which has accelerated with the so-called Washington Consensus -the basis of neoliberalism - towards a market economy as the only option in which governments abdicate their responsibilities to protect common goods and the institutions that guarantee collective well-being.

We, various social movements, responded to this corporate and greedy mandate to “tax water”, “put it up for sale”, and “let the market determine its future” with mobilization and resistance. We emphasize the attributes of water, especially fresh water. We highlight the understanding of the water cycle and water as the foundation of life and the dynamics of the earth. We argued for a bio-centric and eco-centric water ethic, affirming that water belongs to all species, to all living beings, to the Earth. Biosystem and ecosystem, these two compound words are complementary, the first referring to a system of values centered on life and the second centered on nature, the centers of the fabric of life and the human species, another species, not the species, not the one that dominates, exploits, extracts, but a species that must be understood in nature, that must be aware of its interdependence

1. Vandana Shiva. *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution and Profit*. Mexico: XXI Century, 2013, p. 32.

2. Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke. *Blue Gold: The Battle Against Corporate Theft of World's Water*. Barcelona: Paidós, 2004

with all beings and things in the world and, in that sense, be responsible and take care of all life as an imperative.

Ultimately, it is about living like, and with water, understanding its rationality, its logic, its intelligence, and being responsible with it in the sense bequeathed to us by Hans Jonas, who in 1979 stated:

“At least it is no longer meaningless to ask whether the state of extra-human nature – the biosphere as a whole and in its parts, which is now subject to our power – has become precisely a good entrusted to and may present us with something like a moral imperative, not only for our sake, but also for its own sake and by its own right. If this were the case, it would require a significant change in thinking about the foundations of ethics. This would imply that we would have to seek not only human good but also the good of non-human things, that is, it would imply extending the recognition of “ends in themselves” beyond the human sphere and incorporating care for them into the concept of human good.”<sup>3</sup>

In short, it is a matter of recognizing the rights of water to its habitat and not hindering its way of flowing, democratizing its condition of being, the basis of the existence of biodiversity.

And in relation to the ways of accessing it, we claim water as public heritage and a fundamental human right, the substance of life not susceptible to profit. The assault on water by private companies, with the support of governments and the advice of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the WTO, was met with campaigns and a struggle to have it definitively and expressly enshrined as a common good and a fundamental human right in the consensus of the United Nations. We, the movements, warn of the acceleration of the climate crisis,

3. Hans Jonas. *El principio de responsabilidad: ensayo de una ética de la civilización tecnológica*. Barcelona: Editorial Derder, 1995, p. 35.

4. Barlow y Clarke, p. 25.

5. Paul Preciado, *Dysphoria mundi*. (Preciado, 53)

the water crisis and the environmental crisis, which is a crisis of human civilization, with the certainty that ‘the Earth will not tolerate abuse forever’, as stated in *Blue Gold*<sup>4</sup>.

Today, we are discussing the change of era, which, in the words of Paul Preciado—quoting Bruno Latour and his subcategory of a new climate regime to talk about the Anthropocene—is a debate currently being held by different disciplines to characterize the era. Preciado asserts we have not only entered, as Latour claims, a ‘new climate regime,’ but also a new somatopolitical regime that affects all living bodies (including the planet itself) and the social institutions of production and reproduction, as well as the traditional segmentations of sex, gender, sexuality, race, health, and disability. ‘The new universality’ is not only, as Latour claims, ‘feeling that the ground is giving way beneath our feet’, but above all, feeling that the living body is about to explode.<sup>5</sup>

The last two decades have been marked by struggles in defense of water, life and territories. While privatization advances, so does resistance, and it is being renewed. Together with the authors of ‘The Production and Reappropriation of the Common: Emancipatory Horizons for a Dignified Life’, we ask ourselves:

“Times of uncertainty are hard. How do we organize the challenges we see? How do we keep alive the embers of the most intimate contents of community and popular horizons amid the immense uncertainty that surrounds us? The dispute over material wealth, over control of areas of material wealth, was in the pipeline in many places: territory, water, energy, seeds and forests. The way in which this disputed material wealth is managed and used, whether through local self-government or the defence of natural common goods, also went beyond the regulations and laws that restrict it to the valuation of value.”<sup>6</sup>

6. Sandra Rátiva, Gaona Carolina, Jiménez Martín, Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, Leopoldo Múnera Ruiz. *La producción y reapropiación de lo común - Horizontes emancipatorios para una vida digna*.

And they emphasize their question by asking us: ‘How can we keep alive the fire of this horizon of reappropriation and recreation, from the strength that springs from the subversion of the foundations of the age-old patriarchal hierarchies of colonial capitalism that suffocate us? Many questions arise from uncertainty and confusion.’<sup>7</sup>

Building the common good is an act of conscience and calls us to the symbolic, political, and emotional recreation of alternatives. The Blue Communities project has its roots in the defence of public and community water management undertaken since the end of the last century, showing alternatives that allow for the renewal of collective water management based on its understanding as a common good and, in terms of access and supply, as a human right.

### Community water management complicates and enriches the notion of the human right to water

The notion of the human right to water has enriched the environmental and socio-political praxis of organized communities. In the community conception of ethnic territorial peoples, peasant communities and urban neighbourhoods, it is impossible to understand human rights as a simple liberal right, nor can the human right to water be understood in a simplified way, as the right to a minimum amount of water coming out of the tap.

Carrying water, caring for it, building useful water systems that allow it to be in the house, in the home, moistening, cleaning, refreshing, feeding us, implies for women, and has always implied, a closeness to it that involves more work and greater expenditure of energy in its care and use. We must

7. Pablo Iannello. Pluralismo Jurídico. In: *Enciclopedia de Filosofía y Teoría del Derecho*. Vol. 1. Jorge Luis Fabra Zamora and Álvaro Núñez Vaquero. Coordinators. Mexico: National Autonomous University of Mexico, 2015; pp. 767-790. Available in: <https://archivos.juridicas.unam.mx/www/bjv/libros/8/3875/24.pdf>

8. Idem 52

approach women’s relationship with water from a feminist perspective and understand it within the framework proposed by Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar and Ana Lilia Salazar Zarco: women’s relationship with water must be understood in the context of work, productive and reproductive work, and the burdens, or rather overburdens, that this entails. ‘In order to conceive of an anti-patriarchal policy against capital, it is not fruitful for us to accept as a starting point the production and reproduction of individuals as a labour force. We need to subvert this premise so as not to ignore or render invisible from the outset the accumulation of creative practices and forms of organization of the reproduction of collective human and more than human life.’<sup>8</sup>

Understanding the life cycle of women in relation to water means recognizing their work, (as water is essentially associated with care and reproductive work), and how it has historically been invisible and undervalued.

Recognition also means revealing the unequal, subordinate relationships based on ‘common sense’ that are imposed on women’s participation in community organizations, institutions, and movements that manage and defend it. The situation for women defenders in hierarchical and authoritarian mixed organizations involves their empowerment and the struggle for recognition of their creative work and equality in political participation – without overloads or exclusions.

From the perspective of legal pluralism, we can begin to understand the complexity of the relationship between water, life, and territory. The plurality of normative orders and principles, their interconnection and interrelation, their contradiction, and juxtaposition can open up our understanding of this struggle that is being waged in society. Perhaps some translation is required to understand that imperative, I am water, I am territory, which is a way of being and which requires an epistemological effort on the part of Western rational thought to understand it.

It is essential and simple to consider that without water there is no life and that, therefore, accessing and coexisting with it is a condition of existence. A necessary question then arises: if water is the origin and foundation, why should it be considered a right? We accept that we are bound by national and international norms and that the rights-based approach allows for universal dialogue. Our struggles have been articulated around the struggle for the human right to water, exercising vigilance and control over its fulfilment. We always associate this right with its characteristics as a public good, but in the face of debates of neoliberalism on the public sphere, we embrace the concept of the common good, a more comprehensive and powerful category, as it encompasses the essential attributes of life, the complexity of its cycle and its journey across the planet.

We also embrace ancestral conceptions and environmental rationality, which come together in a holistic understanding that perceives the indissolubility, untouchability and sacredness of the earth and water. From a multicultural and intercultural perspective, water is perceived as a subject, as a living being, as essential to life. The debate is therefore open on whether it should be considered a human right, which intersects with water justice and the risk that liberal rights will be assumed by companies that conceive of it as a commercial service, and by corporatized states that, under the argument of progressiveness, limit its attribute as a universal right and disregard community forms of water management and self-supply.

In the praxis of our communities and peoples, it is considered strange to refer to the processes that allow them to access clean water and supply it through agreements and arrangements encompassed by the concept of self-management as “services”. It is an autonomous way of life, based on solidarity and working together, which is denied when we are defined as service providers.

A classification is made of types of water supply, sanitation and hygiene services, and different management models are distinguished, all supervised by the State. The diversity of self-managed forms of communities that guarantee their own access to water is not recognized, not because of the absence of the State, but as a historical construction of the communities and peoples themselves, which is part of their heritage.

Our Bolivian friend Óscar Olivera argues, “the relationship between the law and water is complex because, from the Andean perspective, water is a living being and cannot be regulated; it is a common good and a gift from Pacha Mama, which cannot be appropriated by anyone. In 2000, people rose up precisely because of this, because of their communal and ancestral view of water, because everything has life for us and the common good is managed by the people themselves. We were not going to allow water to become a commodity and be privatized.” Hegemonic models ignore traditional, community-based ways of supplying water and guaranteeing water supply based on their own cultural and social mandates.

It is one thing for it to be supposedly guaranteed by corporatized states governed by private commercial law or by public-private partnerships, selling the service according to market logic; it is quite another to have the welfare state model, where water is guaranteed through public bodies governed by public law and whose purpose is to ensure general welfare. Movements for the remunicipalisation of water seek to recover and maintain this model of social and public management.

Our struggle is a struggle for the recognition of community-based, non-profit water management based on a solidarity economy and self-management. We believe that the approach to the human right to water must encompass the complexity expressed in three dimensions: as an individual right, as a collective right and as a right to community self-management of water.



### **The Blue Communities recognises the resistance of organized communities**

The Blue Communities<sup>9</sup> were created at the instigation of the Council of Canadians (an organization founded in 1985 to fight against the free trade agreement between Canada and the United States –promoting fair trade, the defence of the public health system and the right to water) and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). The Blue Communities are a tool for promoting an alternative vision of water based on its consideration as a common good and a fundamental human right. To become a Blue Community, institutions and organizations must adopt resolutions recognizing water and sanitation as human rights and must commit to maintaining their services associated with the public sector, eliminating the use of bottled water in their areas of activity and using tap water instead. There are more than 20 Blue Communities in Canada, and in 2013 the city of Bern, Switzerland, became the first Blue Community outside Canada. Since 2013, new

Blue Communities have been established in Paris, Berlin and Munich, as well as in Greece, Ireland and Spain. For universities joining the campaign, it means a greater commitment to researching water issues from a public interest perspective.

In November 2016, during the Meeting of Cities for Public Water in Madrid, Spain, the Blue Communities proposal was presented, and the Spanish Association of Public Water Supply and Sanitation Operators (AEOPAS) was designated as the ambassador for the initiative in Spain: in Cadiz, Cordoba, Zaragoza, Medina Sidonia, Badajoz and Huelva.<sup>10</sup>

### **Proposal for the implementation of the Blue Communities Project in the Latin American context**

In 2014, Cambuquira, a city in Brazil located in the state of Minas Gerais, known for being immersed in the wonderful region of the Water Circuit –a region unique in the world with several mineral water sources– became the first Blue Community in Latin America. Maude Barlow (one of the authors of Blue Gold) presented the city with the ‘Blue Community’ certificate, placing Cambuquira among the Blue Communities of Canada, the cities of Paris and St. Gallen and Bern in Switzerland. A small community committed to defending water as a human right and

9. The Blue Communities Project. Available in: <https://comunidadazul.org/el-proyecto/>

10. Asociación Española de Operadores de Agua Pública (Aeopas). Blue Communities Project. Available in: <https://www.aeopas.org/index.php/campanas-de-sensibilizacion/comunidades-azules/>

public good; a group of citizens who have come together to protect it and set an example for other communities around the world. The threat of sale announced by the state-owned company CODEMIG, owner of the water parks, for a tender for a public-private partnership that would allow a private company to explore, bottle and sell the mineral water from these water parks, would turn this beautiful water heritage, unique in the world, into a commodity to be bottled and sold. Cambuquira and other cities in the Water Circuit, with their water parks, deserve a better future, a blue future. The recognition as a Blue Community and the presence of Maude Barlow have meant solidarity and support for the fight to defend them and have attracted other support for broader international cooperation around Cambuquira and the Water Circuit region.<sup>11</sup>

On 26 September 2023, the Catholic University of Paraná (PUCPR) was certified as a Blue Community. This certificate was presented by Dinesh Suna (Blue Communities Switzerland), Javier Márquez (Blue Communities Latin America) and Meera Karunanathan (Blue Planet Project, Canada) to Elias Wolf (Blue University of Brazil).

### Expanding Blue Communities in Latin America

The Platform for Public-Community Agreements in the Americas has committed to the Blue Communities proposal in partnership with the Blue Planet Project. Meera Karunanathan has presented us with this challenge in the following words:

“One might think that in Latin America the relationship is different. It is time to enrich

11. “Maude Barlow solicita ña privatização do Circuito das Águas Mineiro”. Revista Hotéis; 21st march 2017. Available in: <https://www.revistahoteis.com.br/maude-barlow-solicita-nao-privatizacao-do-circuito-das-aguas-mineiro/>

12. Meera Karunanathan. Blue Communities Project. In: *Memorias Encuentro Horizontes de la Gestión Comunitaria del Agua en América Latina*. Platform for Community Partnerships of the Americas, Medellín; 2019. p. 38.

the project together with communities, to review the concepts we have built up to now, and to consider how to apply them in new contexts. Because our strength lies in our community roots. It is also important to bear in mind that states are also being privatised. We need to recognise global economic powers and how weak states recognise themselves in relation to them, and also recognise the power of civil society and be able to make or propose changes. In Latin America in particular, there are issues that are not understood in the North, but there are things that are universal: food, energy, water, biodiversity, and the idea of social justice, which is also part of saving ourselves as a civilisation, and that is the debate we are in. With future lives at stake, the commitment is enormous.”<sup>12</sup>

This challenge posed by Meera, with the certainty that the Blue Communities project is an opportunity to advance in the creation of a new narrative. Blue Communities highlight the construction of alternatives that go beyond the public -state sphere and recognise the work of communities, through self-management, guarantee their own access to water for domestic and agricultural use, as in the case of peasant and indigenous communities. Community boards, community aqueduct associations, water committees, cooperatives, that is, self-managed water systems, are our Blue Communities. Fortunately, a powerful force opposes privatization and, through its daily work, de-privatizes and keeps the management of water access and supply in collective and supportive hands, carrying out many ancestral cultural, economic and environmental practices.

Community organizations involved in community water management have inherited this common legacy as a mandate to respect water as a communal good, restore its habitat and ensure that no one lacks water in their homes and fields. That is why we understand that the Blue Communities project is an opportunity to advance in the creation of a new narrative that recovers memory and contributes to the history of community water management highlight the construction of

alternatives that go beyond the public-state and private-business sectors. The struggle for recognition of the work of organized communities in self-management, provision and supply of water is recognized by Blue Communities in order to raise awareness of their existence. The following are the principles and commitments:

- To defend and work for the right to community self-management of water.
- Recognize and defend water as a common good and as a fundamental human right in terms of access and supply.
- Vindicate the collective right to the protection, conservation and restoration of ecosystems essential to the water cycle. Respect the right of water to its habitat and protect watersheds.
- Reject all forms of privatization, commercialization and commodification of water.
- Guarantee gender equality and equity in all areas of life in organizations and processes, fighting for the defence of water and life.
- Promote dialogue and intergenerational equity by including young people in the life of the organization.
- Implement transparent environmental and administrative management practices.
- Commit to returning used water to its original purity or, in any case, in a condition that allows it to be recycled by the sources. Manage wastewater properly.
- Commit to not bottling or consuming bottled water at community facilities and events.

Promote cooperation agreements between community systems and their articulation in networks to fight for the defence of organizations, water, life and territories.

### What do we gain by being a Blue Community?

Being a Blue Community means having a certificate that legitimises and recognises community water management practices. It is a distinction that symbolises your link with social organizations and public institutions that make similar commitments in many territories and with which bonds of twinning and solidarity are built. International recognition of our work in defence of water strengthens our experiences and allows for exchange and mutual learning, as well as the documentation of our community's history for dissemination and the exchange of experiences with sister organisations from other parts of the continent and the world.

Being part of the Blue Communities movement means participating in international solidarity and receiving support in the event of threats and/or attacks on our status as community organisations defending water, life and territory.

This expansion process has begun with three experiences, two from Colombia and one from Minas Gerais in Brazil: The El Cascajo Community Aqueduct in the municipality of Marinilla in the department of Antioquia, the Association of Community Aqueducts of Tasco (ASOACCTASCO) in the department of Boyacá, and the Hierro Viejo Rural Drinking Water Supply Cooperative in the province of Petorca, Chile. These three reference experiences will serve, through their systematisation, to enrich the Blue Communities from a Latin American perspective. These are our three experiences narrated in the voices of their protagonists:

### ASOACCTASCO, Blue Community Conversation with Marta Alexandra Gutiérrez and Pedro Avel Castañeda

For the Tasco Community Aqueduct Association (ASOACCTASCO), it has been particularly significant to know that it has been recognised as a Blue Community. This reaffirms that they have become a benchmark





not only nationally but also internationally – in the fight to defend ecosystems that are essential for the water cycle and community self-management of water.

Being known as the Blue Community gives greater meaning to the struggle they have waged for decades, making visible to the world the strength of the collective work of farmers who unite around a common goal: to protect their territory and, with it, their capacity for self-management to guarantee their human right to water. They are filled with pride knowing that they will continue to inspire other communities to, as they say, ‘come together to tackle the neoliberal extractivist policies that deny our right to land, water and life.’

During the workshops held as part of this recognition as a Blue Community, in which the leaders of these struggles and young people who are beginning to get involved in the process participated, a critical reading of their history was carried out. This exercise allowed them to identify a series of political lessons and represented, for those who have been the protagonists of these struggles, the opportunity to pass on this legacy to young people. and represents the possibility of understanding the full impact of the struggle undertaken and, consequently, their enormous responsibility to keep the ASOACCTASCO process alive, given that the challenges that gave rise to it remain present due to the intensification of privatization policies.

One of the political lessons learned has to do with becoming visible beyond local borders. In their words, ‘we managed to make our voice heard louder,’ therefore, being a Blue Community at this moment in their struggle, gives them new and renewed energy to continue defending the Pisba páramo from the current risk of fracking and to continue community self-management of water in the face of the new regulatory frameworks of the current government in the emergency caused by COVID-19, disregards community aqueducts, making them even more vulnerable. ASOACCTASCO will continue to work in accordance with the principles that led to its recognition as a Blue Community and that have always been part of its identity. Within the framework of the workshops held, they decided to continue their work of organisational strengthening of the aqueducts in the department of Boyacá through the Boyacá Community Aqueduct Network; lead the process of forming alliances between the municipalities of the province of Valderrama that are facing the risk of fracking; raise its profile as a Blue Community in all community and institutional spaces, making clear what this means, with special emphasis on community aqueducts, as they share each and every one of the principles that identify a Blue Community.

Once these actions were carried out, they decided to continue their work of strengthening the organisation of the aqueducts in the department of Boyacá through the Boyacá Community Aqueduct Network; to lead the

process of forming alliances between the municipalities in the province of Valderrama that are facing the risk of fracking; to raise their profile in all community and institutional spaces as a Blue Community, making clear what this means; with special emphasis on community aqueducts, as they share each and every one of the principles that identify a Blue Community.

### **The Rural Drinking Water Union of the Petorca River Basin, a blue community in Chile**

The Rural Drinking Water Union of the Petorca River Basin is the organisation that administers and manages rural drinking water for the inhabitants of the commune. In Hierro Viejo, one of the 25 rural localities of Petorca, is located the Rural Drinking Water Cooperative of Hierro Viejo, the office where the Rural Drinking Water Union (APR) meets.<sup>13</sup>

In this context of environmental catastrophe, the Petorca River Basin Rural Drinking Water Union was created in 2014 as a non-profit legal entity. Serving as an example of solidarity and territorial unity, as well as the efficient and timely delivery of water to the inhabitants of the territory; they promote and provide training on the proper use of water resources in educational and community contexts, and actively participate in current social movements to demand the human right to water. Above all, they act as a solidarity network that promotes the common good. Since the establishment of the Petorca River Basin APR Union, there has been greater solidarity and concern for the collective well-being. Thanks to the need that brought them together, people have gotten to know each other and achieved common goals.

Since 2019, the APR Union has created a solidarity initiative called ‘Minga del agua’ (Water Minga), which consists of supporting APRs with fewer resources in any

<sup>13</sup>. Movimiento Regional por la tierra (2017). La familia del agua: la unión de agua potable rural en Petorca. Available in: <https://porlatierra.org/casos/208/caracteristicas>

improvements required by the community with regard to water use. These mingas involve community work with the labour force of operators and volunteers from the community at large, using their own or self-managed resources. It should be noted that the minga or minka is a pre-Columbian tradition of voluntary community work for social or reciprocal purposes, currently in force in several Latin American countries.

The APR Union is the first community organisation in Chile to join the Blue Community and the third in Latin America to belong to the Vida Network, which promotes water and land management by local actors themselves. All these achievements affirm the APR Union’s right to access land. Without water there is no life, there is no land, rural life dies, forcing the inhabitants of the territory to submit to precarious work on large agricultural estates or, in the worst cases, to emigrate to the cities and abandon the land with its history, its traditions and its dreams of fulfilment.

### **Associates of the Cascajo Aqueduct (ADEC): a Blue Community in the municipality of Marinilla, Antioquia**

We celebrate the recognition of the Cascajo Community Aqueduct as a Blue Community. This recognition is the result of years of work and perseverance in building an organized community guided by water. Water, that vital resource, has enabled the community and territory to be built. Today, facing multiple conflicts, the Cascajo community knows that it is through assembly and by visiting every house in the neighbourhood, every bend in the road and every path that a solidarity-based water management system is built. Indigenous peasant communities face many transformations in their territories, whether due to changes in land use, consumption that produces so much waste, or the installation of exploitative practices such as monoculture flower farming (that causes so much pollution), and the countless conflicts associated with water pollution and the privatisation of access and supply.