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Editorial: Water and sanitation: privatization of the services and environmental injustice

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Water and sanitation: privatization of the services and environmental injustice

Water and sanitation remains a very challenging and contested socio-ecological terrain. Around the world, the record of success is uneven, while new problems continue to emerge associated, for instance, with chaotic urbanization, lack of public investment and climate change. The pattern of responses is complex, ranging from local initiatives and national policies to the 2030 Agenda, which aims for integration in public policies for cities at the transition to sustainability. Its topic *Water and sanitation: privatization of the services and environmental injustice* deals with the goal included in the SDG 6—*Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all*—which specifically focuses on access to drinking water and sanitation services. More than that, it creates a space for reflection and debate, which is also the main goal of this Research Topic.

Notably the configuration and function of large cities reflect the incessant and dependent interlinkages between local, national, and international spheres of hydro-social interaction. The “urban” is a specific arena of dispute, creativity and confrontation (de Castro et al., 2021). The provision of sewage collection, disposal, and treatment services and the appropriation of water generate and intensify conflicts, which are all socio-spatial phenomena that require appropriate theorization. The comprehension of these different aspects requires a proper understanding of which can be called “distributive environmental conflicts,” in the case of access to water, and “spatial environmental conflicts,” when considering the sewage pollution (Zhourri and Laschefski, 2010). Consequently, the complexity of environmental conflicts demands integrate perspectives to deal with ecosystemic, social, economic, cultural, and institutional dimensions (Fernández-Vargas, 2017).

Despite that intricate and multidimensional complexity, it is possible to report a common ground of experiences related to unequal access to water and sanitation services. In the case of sanitation-related health issues, the process of development normally leads to an asymmetric environmental risk exposure and unfair access to treated water, what mainly affect vulnerable populations and minority groups. In the end, water and sanitation offer some of the most concrete and disturbing process of environmental injustice in the contemporary world.

Environmental injustice is the process in which socio-economically unequal societies allocate most environmental damages to low-income populations, socio-economically vulnerable populations, discriminated racial groups and minorities (Acsehrad et al., 2009). Water circulates and changes through the city, and such movement serves to transgress boundaries between urban locations and to bring more closely together groups and agendas happening in different scales (Ioris, 2015). A case in point is the situation of water and sanitation in large Latin America cities, related to questionable management of public funds and the ideological mystification of technologies, projects and strategies.

Historically, the public supply of water and sanitation became a matter of public interest, however in recent times, many municipalities and national governments have embarked on the privatization of such services. It is a controversial and risky strategy, which calls for a critical consideration of old and new inefficiencies and inequalities, as well as multiple responsibilities and omissions. In that context, this Research Topic aimed at discussing the privatization of water and sanitation around the world, seeking to understand the situation of the most vulnerable segments of society and contrast with the rent-seeking approach of private companies. A leading question was how does this sector serve communities that need investments in basic infrastructure the most, instead of making profit?

The first article published, *Different positions in society, differing views of the world: the privatization of water and sanitation services in Minas Gerais, Brasil* (Neves-Silva et al.) analyses the specific situation of the state of Minas Gerais, after the implementation of the Brazilian Federal Law 14.026, which facilitated the privatization of water and sanitation services. In the paper it is discussed privatization as an instrument for universalization, which is in dispute between those who advocate for the neoliberal agenda and those who defend the improvement of public management. The research aims to understand the positioning of different social actors, by using the method of content analysis. The researchers accessed public speeches of social actors from government, civil society, and private sector, concluding that the current government in charge is aligned with the positions of the private sector. Those decision makers agree that privatization is the path to the universalization of access to water and sanitation, they don't mention the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation. On the other hand, some civil society organizations believe that privatization will lead to a discontinuation of the access to vulnerable populations, due to tariff increases, which often means a worsening of inequalities.

The paper *Divergent perspectives about water security: hydrosocial transformations in the metropolitan region of Montevideo* (Tadeu et al.) also addresses the dispute of different points of views among social actors, this time focusing on water security concepts. The paper analyses the arguments used to support and to oppose a federal government hydraulic project at the Montevideo Metropolis—*Neptuno Project*. It used primary and secondary data to define the coalitions involved in the dispute. The main object of conflict among the groups is about the involvement of the private sector with water supply services. The paper reveals that there are diverse perspectives concerning water security and that they are based on different hydrosocial projects that aim to opposed interests of each group. Those opposing groups organized

in coalitions present asymmetrical power relations, reactivating a historic conflict against privatization. Although the *Neptuno Project* is localized in the region of Montevideo Metropolis, this polemic debate took the issue to the national scale.

The following two articles address the agenda of the re-municipalization of water and sanitation services, in different Latin American contexts. In the article *Balance on social inclusion and environmental justice at the end of the 30 years of the drinking water service concession in the city of Aguascalientes, Mexico* (Caldera Ortega and Zamora) the authors delve into the complex dynamics of water and sanitation services privatization through the lens of political ecology, focusing on social inclusion and environmental justice dimensions. Aguascalientes, Mexico, serves as a critical turning point to discuss the consequences of water commodification, showcasing how privatized management prioritizes profitability over universal and sustainable access to water. The decision to re-municipalize drinking water and sewage services, following the contract's end with Veolia, reveals a direct response to the challenges posed by market logic, leading to the overexploitation of local water resources and imposing a disproportionate financial burden, while neglecting to ensure regular water access for all. The authors' critical analysis highlights the inadequacy of cross-subsidies and inefficiency in service management, which culminated in a "silent and fragmented privatization" of water, exacerbating social inequalities and compromising environmental justice.

Just as in the previous article, the authors of *Social movements in defense of public water services: the case of Spain* (van den Berge et al.) utilized the theoretical premise of political ecology and environmental justice to explore the complex fabric of social movements in defense of public water services in Spain. The article unfolds the last decade of struggles against the privatization of water supply in various cities and regions of Spain, highlighting a growing momentum toward the re-municipalization of water services and the intensification of debates on the implementation of the human right to water and sanitation. The study presents an in-depth analysis of the interactions between water social movements in Spain, such as the Red Agua Publica. Through five case studies, the authors illustrate how the framework of the human right to water and sanitation served as a powerful tool for social and water justice movements. It offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by these movements in Spain, emphasizing the importance of social mobilization and citizen participation in the governance of water resources and the promotion of water and environmental justice.

Overall, the above papers research into consolidated experiences, cases of re-municipalization or in privatization processes, and can help decision makers in the formulation of national guidelines through to the implementation of water and sanitation services. There are other cases that can shed light on the problems faced in the process of the privatization of water and sanitation services and we hope this Research Topic discussion can help in this crucial discussion. It raises fundamental questions about the efficacy and fairness of state-led initiatives and development trends. There is, therefore, a real demand for new analytical tools able to make sense of the growing number of cross-scale interactions and relations (Ioris, 2013). Critical scholars have here a great opportunity and the responsibility to assess those

complex, cross-scale phenomena in a way that helps to remove pre-established conceptions about the origin of problems and the search for fair, inclusive and transformative solutions.

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