

## Water sector stakeholders nationwide vow to oppose privatization

Written by IBON National

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Water district unions from Luzon, Vizayas and Mindanao and consumers, as well as representatives from peasants, workers, indigenous people, fisherfolk, women and environment advocates came together last November to hold a national anti-water privatization assembly.

Attended by over 120 delegates, the "Water is Life" national conference was aimed at opposing ongoing efforts to further privatize the water sector, such as pending bills at the Senate and Congress such as the Senate Bill (SB) 2997. Also known as the Water Sector Reform Act of 2012, the bill outlines the privatization of water through public-private partnerships (PPPs), which consumers and water district employees say will create monopolies in the merging of water districts, and lay-off thousands of water utilities employees.

Spearheaded by the Water Systems Employees Response (WATER), Water is Life, Solidarity Opposed to Privatization Alliance (STOP) and the Water for the People Network (WPN), the conference was held at the UP College of Social Work and Community Development.

The whole-day conference featured inputs from IBON Executive Director Sonny Africa, WATER Chairperson Rudy Aranquez, Confederation for Unity, Recognition and Advancement of Government Employees (COURAGE) national chairperson Ferdinand Gaité, WATER Secretary General Ramir Corcolon and representatives from the Davao Water District management and the San Pablo water districts. The conference became a venue to gather the responses of sectors on water privatization, for focused group discussions and unification on the campaign statement which culminated the event.

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IBON explained water privatization in the context of the profit-seeking globalization framework. According to Africa, the pending Senate Bill 2997 contradicts a recent UN General Assembly resolution that the right to water is a human right. Government should therefore ensure the safe and adequate provision of water instead of treating it as an economic good. Africa stressed that transnational corporations and international financial institutions such as the World Bank are the primary proponents of water privatization, calling it 'cost-effective intervention' in providing an 'economic good with a social nature'.

The World Bank, he added, has designed almost all water sector policies in the Philippines up to SB 2997. It was behind many water privatization projects nationwide including those in Clark, Subic, Mindoro and Baguio, which elevated the Manila Water Company to be one of the top 20 biggest water corporations worldwide. He also noted the trend of corporatization and public-private partnerships (PPPs) in the water sector worldwide where instead of the outright sale of water agencies, government maintains shares while most of the operations are privately-run. This has redefined efficiency to be measured by the amount of profit generated rather than the quality of service provided.

According to Africa, privatization has always led to higher costs for the public. Manila water rates are now among the highest in Asia, topping Hanoi, Bangkok and Hongkong. Meanwhile, water services in European countries such as England, Italy and France are gradually being re-nationalized or returned to the public sector due not only to skyrocketing rates but also because of health issues.

Meanwhile, Gaitanarios explained public-private partnerships as an attempt to cover up for the failure of privatization. He said that government, by no longer invoking privatization per se, attempts to make the public believe that it stands to gain its share in profit-making through

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corporatization and public private partnerships.

Gaite shared that privatization have resulted in 1.5 million retrenchments during the first year of the privatization of utilities in the Philippines including water. He also cited cases of privatization woes across sectors in other countries which have resulted in mass-layoffs and outsourcing of academic personnel in Japan, the use of the term 'seasonal' even for non-agricultural workers in Austria, and the replacement of collective bargaining agreement by individual employment contracts in Sri Lanka.

On a hopeful note, Gaite also narrated stories of anti-privatization struggles. In New Delhi, India, people opposed soaring water rates and were able to stop the privatization of a water plant. In South Africa, the Municipal Workers' Union fought water privatization. Water privatization has been declared illegal in many municipalities in France, which is home to the biggest water transnational corporations.

Gaite also described how numerous water district unions across the country continue to gather strength in advancing unionism and defending the people's right to water in unity with various sectors with their respective interests in water such as for irrigation, energy generation, fisheries, among others. He underscored the need to broaden and strengthen various sectors' unity against privatization not only to uphold labor rights but to stop profit seekers' drive to monopolize and gain from running public services and utilities at the expense of the people.

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The conference ended upon the plenary's approval of the conference unity statement. Calls to strengthen ranks for a united stand against water privatization and for the defense of the people's right to water resounded before the conference was adjourned. The following day, hundreds of water utilities employees and from various people's sectors protested at the Senate building in Pasay City to demand the junking of SB 2997. (end)

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