

Nestlé and the Privatization of Water: A Tale of Many Cities

By [Franklin Frederick](#)

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Region: [Europe](#), [Latin America & Caribbean](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Environment](#), [Global Economy](#)

On November 14th the Canadian group Wellington Water Watchers organized the “All Eyes on Nestlé” conference in the city of Guelph, Ontario, bringing together indigenous’ peoples and citizens’ movements fighting Nestlé’s water takings from Canada, the US, France and Brazil.

Following this public event, the representatives of the organizations involved met for a workshop to exchange information and discuss possible common strategies of resistance to this giant corporation water grabbing. From the experiences and stories shared by groups as different as the Collectif Eau 88 – from the city of Vittel, France – Save Our Water – from Elora, Canada – or the Michigan Citizens for Water Conservation -from the US – it became clear that there is a common pattern in all these places where Nestlé takes water for its bottling facilities, contrary to this companies’ claim that any problem is always just a local issue. This common pattern shows, for instance, that the amounts of water taken – for which Nestlé pays close to nothing – usually causes groundwater levels to sink, affects ecosystems and endangers the water supply of the local citizens. In Vittel, for instance, Nestlé and the community take water from the same aquifer and French state institutions recognized that this situation put at risk the aquifer, since the water takings went faster than its natural replenishing. The solution proposed by the French authorities? To build a pipeline of about 14 km to bring water from another place for the inhabitants of Vittel, so that Nestlé could continue undisturbed its business pumping the groundwater from Vittel!!!

Thanks to the resistance of the Collectif Eau 88, the pipeline project was politically defeated and another solution has to be found to protect the aquifer. But if it were not for this citizens’ movement, the pipeline project would have been built with tax payers money. In Wellington County, Nestlé Waters Canada has permission to extract 4,7 million litres of water a day in wells at Hillsburgh and Aberfoyle and according to Mike Balkwill from Wellington Water Watchers, “ the company has applied to renew those permits , while it extracts water without the consent of Six Nations, on whose territory it operates, and despite public opposition from several indigenous organizations.” And again, thanks to the resistance of both Six Nations and other citizens’ movements, the moratorium on water permits that would end on next January 1st was recently extended by the authorities to October 2020.

The situation is the same in Florida where although the local water authority considers that the water system is in recovery from overexploitation, Nestlé still wants to pump water from Ginnie Springs. The common pattern emerging from these and other cases – in the State of Michigan or in the small city of São Lourenço in Brazil – also shows that it is always local groups that defend water, not the State’s water or environmental authorities. On the

contrary, another pattern that repeats itself in most of the cases, governments very often side with the corporation against the citizens.

Even worse, in many places Nestlé “merges” with the local authorities, as in Maine where a Nestlé manager was on the State’s environmental protection agency board or in Vittel where a deputy mayor was sued for a conflict of interest concerning the pipeline project: this deputy, departmental councillor Claudie Pruvost, was married to a Nestlé executive from Vittel, president of an association that had been chosen to bring the Water Development and Management Project to the Local Water Commission that Mrs Pruvost chaired. The trial was delayed because the case had to be moved from the court in the city of Epinal – the closest to Vittel – to the city of Nancy because the vice-president of the court in Epinal was also married to the Director of Nestlé Waters in Vittel!

Nestlé always tries to establish alliances or partnerships with Governments to protect itself and its bottling operations, especially in its home country, Switzerland, where its image has to be more carefully protected. Recently, the ex-Nestlé’s Head of Public Affairs, Christian Frutiger, was appointed Vice-Director of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation – SDC, the Swiss Government Agency responsible for Development Aid programmes – where he will be responsible for SDC’s Global WATER program!

The ecological damage caused by Nestlé’s water takings and bottling facilities are not locally limited either. PET water bottles are one of the main sources of plastic waste worldwide. One single example suffices to give an idea of the contribution of Nestlé to this problem: according to Wellington Water Watchers, if the Government approves Nestlé’s permits to take water from commercial bottling in Wellington County, the company will produce more than 3 billion 500 ml. of plastic bottles per year – laid end-to-end, that number would circle the earth 16 times! And this amount of plastic comes just from two sites in Wellington County! Nestlé has dozens of such bottling facilities all over the world, using huge amounts of fossil fuels to produce more billions of plastic bottles. If we add to that all the fuel consumed to transport all these bottles – mainly by truck – we can also see the significant impact of Nestlé on climate change.



WATER FOR LIFE
NOT PROFIT

ALL EYES ON NESTLÉ



Learn about the impact of Nestlé water bottling in communities around the world. Water is a human right and a public trust and should never be under the control of private corporations like Nestlé. Learn more about how to take action to protect water and **Say No To Nestlé water bottling in Ontario.**

Guelph • Thursday, November 14
7pm – 9pm (Doors open at 6:30 pm)

SPEAKERS

- Dawn Martin-Hill - Six Nations
- Bernhard and Renée-Lise Schmitt - Collectif Eau 88
- Franklin Frederick - Brazil/Switzerland
- Peggy Case - Michigan Citizens for Water Conservation
- Miranda Fox - Story of Stuff
- Merrilee Jipson - Santa Fe River Inc.
- Gina Luster - Flint Rising
- Nickie Sekera - Community Water Justice

WHERE: Trinity United Church
400 Stevenson St N, Guelph

FOR MORE INFO: Email us at wellingtonwaterwatchers@gmail.com

wellington *Water* watchers.ca



Image from the author

Such patterns are intrinsic to Nestlé's bottling operations worldwide and to the economic and political power of this giant multinational corporation. Countries such as Canada, the US or France are among the wealthiest and most traditional democratic societies in our planet and still their citizens have to fight very hard and for very long just to achieve some minimum level of protection of ground and surface waters, ecosystems and for their access to water in the future – things that in a democracy we would take for granted as an obligation of the State. But if Nestlé can manage to have governments on its side and against the citizens even in such traditional democracies as the US, Canada and France, what then may happen to communities facing Nestlé's water grabbing in much less democratic and much more vulnerable societies in Africa, Latin America or Asia?

In our time, multinational corporations became the main source of economic and political power, as explained by Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy in their classic work "Monopoly Capital":

“Votes are the nominal source of political power and money is the real source: the system, in other words, is democratic in form and plutocratic in content.(...) Suffice it to say that all the political activities and functions which may be said to constitute the essential characteristics of the system – indoctrinating and propagandizing the voting public, organizing and maintaining political parties, running electoral campaigns – can be carried out only by means of money, lots of money. And since in monopoly capitalism the big corporations are the source of big money, they are also the main source of political power.”

In fact, some transnational corporations have profits bigger than the GNP of the large majority of the countries in the world. One example may give a better view of the economic power of such corporations as compared to other international institutions: in 2017 Nestlé spent 7.2 billion US dollars on global advertising efforts. The World Health Organization proposed budget for 2016-2017 was US\$ 4.384.9 million. It is important to understand as well that the modern transnational corporation is also the ‘natural’ successor of the old colonial powers, with the difference that while the old colonial powers concentrated in exploiting the global south, their contemporary heirs are able to exploit the global NORTH as well, when the resources they need are located there, as Paul Sweezy explained in this quote from “Modern Capitalism and Other Essays”:

“(...) there is no reason to suppose that a corporation would willingly exempt foreign markets and sources of supply from its planning horizon just because they happen to be outside a particular set of national boundaries.”

In fact, communities in Canada, France and the US trying to protect their water resources from Nestlé are fighting the same battles that communities in the global south always had to fight in order to protect their own resources from colonial grabbing. The old colonial powers used local oligarchies submissive to their politics and economic views as rulers in their colonies, which became the “governance model” in most of the global south. Under neoliberalism, this model has been exported to the global north where transnational corporations are gradually taking over the democratic space and the political power, turning many places in the north into mirror images of colonised communities in the global south. Under this new colonial power, governments in the south as in the north become willing servants of the corporate sector, making sure that despite environmental and social damage the corporations get access to the resources they need.

But this fact creates an important new opening for communication, solidarity, understanding and common action between citizens’ groups fighting water privatization in the global north and in the global south. The fight, south or north, is the same: to keep water in public hands under democratic control. And to fight for water is also to fight for our endangered democracies under the authoritarian threat of corporate control, south or north. A new alliance between south and north can emerge that will be a powerful movement challenging the corporate sector and its servants. The corporations, of course, will fight back and Nestlé, again, has already a long and successful history of fighting civil society.

In the 1970s an international boycott was launched against Nestlé due to its practices of promoting bottle feeding and discouraging breast feeding, causing infant illness and death in southern poorer countries. This campaign, known at the time as “Nestlé kills babies”, had an unprecedented impact on the company, much damaging its image. To fight this campaign Nestlé hired Raphael Pagan, an Army Intelligence Officer at the US Department of Defence. Pagan advised US Presidents Nixon, Reagan and Bush on Third World Policies – which

means, on how to fight back Third World Liberation movements. In fact, Nixon was the US President who gave support to General Pinochet coup d'état against elected President Salvador Allende in Chile, throwing this country in a murderous military dictatorship that lasted for years. Pagan received a Life Achievement Award from President Reagan – the US President waging war against the Nicaraguan Sandinista Government, killing and terrorizing thousands of people in Central America. Raphael Pagan was very effective in fighting back the international boycott against Nestlé, mainly by designing a strategy to divide the civil society groups organizing the campaign. This partnership with military intelligence to fight civil society organizations was so successful that Nestlé went deeper in this collaboration.

In 2002 Nestlé hired John Hedley, an ex-MI6 agent – British military intelligence – as Head of Security. Among other things, Hedley was responsible for organizing an operation to spy civil society groups critical to Nestlé in Switzerland, mainly the ATTAC group. When this operation was unveiled by a Swiss investigative journalist that denounced it in the Swiss TV, Nestlé had to face a court case and was condemned by the Swiss justice for it. Nestlé also developed what is known as the “War Room”, a high-tech communication centre that tracks in real time any mention to Nestlé in social media, so that the company can react fast to any “threats” posed by people. In 2011 Nestlé organized its annual “Creating Shared Values” conference in Washington in partnership with “The Atlantic Council” – a US based organization that brings together big business, politicians and the military. The Atlantic Council – hence its name – is a member of NATO – the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (more about it [here](#)).

The main panel discussion at this event was with Nestlé’s CEO Peter Brabeck and the President and CEO of The Atlantic Council Frederick Kempe, with the title:

‘Creating Shared Value in Latin America: Opportunities, Obstacles and Future Directions in Nutrition, WATER , Rural Development’

I guess that what the panel called ‘obstacles’ was – and still is – civil society movements trying to keep their natural resources – including water – in public hands. When challenged with this kind of resistance from society, corporations like Nestlé may find it very useful to have NATO at their side to help “convincing” rebel governments to give away their natural resources for the corporate sector profit – not for the development of the country.

Nestlé also has a special program to hire ex-US military men and women, see [this](#) and [this](#).

Maybe just to keep the close links with the US military, since, as far as I know, there is no Nestlé special program to hire ex-Swiss or ex-French military people, just US ones...

These examples suffice to show that Nestlé has a leadership position in imposing corporate control over democratic institutions in order to have access to natural resources like water. The examples also show that Nestlé is far ahead in developing strategies and partnerships to fight back civil society resistance.

Only united, north and south, can we hope to protect our waters from corporate grabbing and our democracies from corporate control. There is no other way.

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