Bolivia’s Next Water War
Historicizing the Struggles over Access
to Water Resources in the Twenty-First Century

Nicole Fabricant and Kathryn Hicks

Bolivia, a small country in central South America with nearly 9 million people, a majority of them indigenous, has received much national and international attention for the strength and power of its social movements. Over the past decade or so, these movements have focused their mobilizations on questions of access to, and collective governance of, natural resources. These popular mobilizations began with the Water War in 2000 in the city of Cochabamba, where diverse actors came together to stand against private control of the municipal water supply, and continued several years later with the gas war in El Alto, a popular struggle to reclaim control of gas from transnational corporations. Although these movements have been recognized internationally as icons of successful antiglobalization resistance, activists have encountered many obstacles in moving beyond this form of protest to launch water governance strategies based upon the principle of social justice. As problems of access are worsened by global warming, we query whether these fragile movements will be able to translate lessons from the water wars into rethinking and restructuring municipal water systems to fulfill the promise of water as a human right enshrined in the Bolivian constitution, which prioritizes local needs over corporate profit.

In this article, we explore the recent history of water privatization and social movement activism in El Alto, a poor, largely Aymara satellite of the high-altitude
capital La Paz, and Cochabamba, a bustling urban area that comprises mainly Quechua and mestizo (mixed-race) peoples located in Bolivia’s central valley. These cities sit at the nexus of population pressure and resource scarcity, profit-based solutions and successful social movement action. Both El Alto and Cochabamba were pressured to grant concessions to transnational corporations, and when they failed to live up to their promises, both cities experienced successful mobilizations to reverse these concessions but, after several years, have been unable to develop a just alternative. In the last section of this article, we turn toward ongoing struggles over water governance in the age of global warming, drawing on our recent fieldwork in El Alto and La Paz.

**Water Privatization Exacerbates Preexisting Problems**

The influence and power of external forces in Bolivia is not a new story but rather has a much longer history dating back to the colonial period. Bolivia is a country rich in resources, but this wealth served initially to fuel Europe’s, and later North America’s, economic development at the expense of the Bolivian people. The extractive economy of the Spanish empire gave rise to a racialized, laboring hierarchy whereby native peoples were forced to migrate from original lands and territories and were subjugated to slave labor conditions.1 As Uruguayan journalist, writer, and novelist Eduardo Galeano puts it, “From slavery to the encomienda [grant] of service, and from this to the encomienda of tribute and the regime of wages, variants in the Indian labor force’s juridical condition made only superficial changes in the real situation.”2 In three centuries, Cerro Rico, the silver mine in Potosí, consumed 8 million lives as Indians were torn from their agricultural communities and driven to the “mouth of hell,” which swallowed thousands every year.3 Some scholars have suggested that this inequality born of colonial conquest has become even starker in the contemporary period. For example, political economist Susan Spronk compares earlier forms of discrimination against indigenous peoples to contemporary policies of neoliberalism, which have adversely affected indigenous peoples and the working classes by liberalizing markets, privatizing state-owned industries, slashing all forms of state support and programming for the poor, and preventing sovereign control of natural resources.4

From the “old globalization” of colonialism to new forms of globalization whereby resource extraction is facilitated by debt relations, there is continuity between past and present. The next battles over Bolivian resources will likely involve lithium deposits located underneath the salt flats in Uyuni, Potosí, which have excited companies from Japan and France; iron ore in the country’s east, disputed by China, Venezuela, and India; minerals in the high Andes, targeted by France, Japan, Canada, Australia, and the United States; and land in the east, as high prices in crude oil and excessive use of fossil fuels, soy, and sugar provide opportunities for biodiesel production.5 Perhaps the most important of these continuing and emerg-
ing battles is that over control of water resources in the country.

Water privatization in Cochabamba and El Alto was adopted under the framework of “green neoliberalism,” or the idea that corporate management can improve service and enhance conservation of scarce resources, while bringing in healthy profits. In both cities, increasing pressure on the water supply coincided with the withdrawal of the state from many aspects of resource management, virtually ensuring private distribution of this scarce resource.

Cochabamba and El Alto both experienced rapid population growth during the second half of the twentieth century, putting constant pressure on municipal infrastructure. This process of expansion began with agricultural reform in the early 1950s, as haciendas were broken up and land redistributed, and continued as life in rural areas became more precarious. Among other things, migration to these urban centers was spurred by the massive public-sector layoffs that followed the privatization of the mining industry and by ecological challenges to farming like drought and soil erosion. Market liberalization and increased participation in wage labor interfered with farmers’ ability to mobilize agricultural labor during planting and harvest seasons, leading to increased failure in rural household production. El Alto grew from a collection of farms in the 1950s to an urban center with a population today of close to 1 million. Similarly, Cochabamba, a much older city, tripled in size from just over two hundred thousand in 1976 to over six hundred thousand today. While both cities lacked the economic resources to meet rising demands for potable water, residents of Cochabamba have long struggled with issues of water scarcity due to their geographic location.

Coming out of the 1980s, Bolivia was deep in debt after a series of military dictators siphoned national resources. Like other countries in Latin America during this period, Bolivia sought out loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in order to pursue the promise of economic development. The loans from the World Bank came with conditions, often referred to as “structural adjustment programs,” which included privatization, public-sector layoffs, and cutbacks on services. Under the New Economic Policy (NEP), all state-owned industries such as mining, transportation, and telecommunications were privatized. A second wave of reform in 1994 involved decentralizing responsibility for infrastructure, education, health care, and other services, from the national government to municipalities. Together these reforms constituted a radical new ideological and philosophical framework to restrict Bolivia’s future economic, social, and political choices to those offered by the free market and to dissolve the responsibilities of a centralized state.

This new ideological and philosophical framework—focused on freedom of foreign capital and opportunity offered by open markets—set the scene for corporate control of water. Political economist Michael Goldman argues that over the course of the 1990s private water management in the global South went from being
one option among several to truly hegemonic, promoted by what he refers to as a “transnational professional class.” Proponents assert that water privatization is a win-win strategy for impoverished populations and for transnational corporations. Those in favor of this strategy argue that the threat of regional and global water scarcity makes this a very lucrative endeavor for businesses, that poor nations lack the capital and technical expertise to invest in infrastructure development and extend services to underserved populations, and that associated rate hikes send a message to consumers about scarcity and promote conservation, an argument referred to as “green neoliberalism.” This consensus allowed the World Bank and the IMF to make many of their loans to poorer nations throughout Latin America, Africa, and Asia conditional upon water privatization.

World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank loans were extended to Bolivia during the early 1990s to pave the way for privatization. The Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, or “Goni,” administration used these loans to create a superintendencia de servicios básicos (superintendency of basic services) to oversee this process. In 1997 a thirty-year water concession for the contiguous cities of La Paz and El Alto was sold to Aguas del Illimani, whose largest shareholder was the French company Suez Lyonnaise. Similarly, in 1999 the Bolivian government sold a forty-year concession of Cochabamba’s water supply to Aguas del Tunari, along with rights to a plan to channel water from a catchment twenty-five miles away from the city. In both cases, the private consortium was guaranteed a 15 percent rate of return. While efficiency, environmental protection, and extension of services were also listed as goals of these projects, in both cases corporate profit was prioritized. The bottom line, then, of transnational water companies was to reduce costs, shoulder the burden of responsibility for construction of new pipelines to community residents, and cut corners wherever necessary.

This bottom line, however, had tremendous economic, human, and social costs. First, Aguas del Illimani in El Alto originally agreed to install water meters to ensure that households would pay based on their usage levels, but this promise was never fulfilled. One challenge for the company in providing water to El Alto was that users conserved water to save money, reducing its potential for profit. Prices rose by an average of $150–$200, putting enormous stress on poor households. For example, the tariffs charged by Aguas del Illimani were approximately $196 for a potable water connection and $249 for a sewage connection, for a total of $445. In a country where the minimum monthly wage is $60 per month, it was clearly unaffordable for a large majority of people. Further, to ensure return on investment, not only did Illimani raise prices, but it failed to provide service to two hundred thousand El Alto residents who, it claimed, were out of the area of “service delivery.” For those deemed “out of service delivery,” the company had written the contract in such a way as to avoid responsibility for large areas of El Alto’s poor neighborhoods. Illimani also refused to run pipelines to these new neighborhoods because it did not
see much return on the investment since the areas were low density and most of the residents were extremely poor. To reduce costs, the company encouraged community members to perform labor each month to build and service pipes and connections. It also used shallow, “condominial” pipes, which were affordable but of lower quality. These pipes are more prone to breakage and leakage than pipes installed farther below the ground surface.13

Residents of Cochabamba experienced similar problems with water privatization, including reported price increases of as much as 200 percent. Some water bills amounted to 20–30 percent of the net household income. In addition to the struggles over rising prices for existing users, residents were equally concerned about the monopoly over water resources provided by the concession. The contract allowed them to install meters on community-built wells not yet connected to the network of Cochabamba’s public water company, the Servicio Municipal de Aguas Potable y Alcantarillado de Cochabamba (Municipal Service for Portable Water and Plumbing in Cochabamba), or SEMAPA, and charge campesino farmers for irrigation. This practice was unheard of in rural areas, as many indigenous communities upheld a form of governance of usos y costumbres, which refers to communitarian indigenous customary law over communal resources like land and water.
The Water Is Ours, Damn It! Political Protests in Cochabamba and El Alto

The sudden and dramatic rise in prices of this critical resource, combined with concerns of corporate malfeasance, sparked intense political organizing. Popular mobilizations in and around Cochabamba began in early November 1999—only months after the concession was granted—as protestors blockaded all three of the main arteries leading into the city. In December organizers created an umbrella organization called La Coordinadora de Defensa del Agua y de la Vida (Coordinator for the Defense of Water and for Life), which brought diverse forces in both the city and countryside together under the platform of collective defense of water.14

The coordinadora practiced an assembly-like direct form of democracy, whereby everyone had a voice in meetings. As Oscar Olivera and Tom Lewis note, “The Coordinadora became a place where humble and simple people—ordinary working people—proved that by organizing, and by creating solidarity and mutual trust, people can lose their sense of fear and give a real content to democracy.”15 This organizational structure in Cochabamba had the capacity to bring together distinct groups, cutting across rural and urban, different classes and ethnicities, and straddling historic divides.

The coordinadora orchestrated a series of interethnic, cross-regional mobilizations across Cochabamba. On February 4 and 5, protestors came together to seize the old colonial core plaza, and on April 4, 1999 (what they deemed the final battle), the coordinadora organized a symbolic occupation of the new headquarters of Aguas del Tunari, with marches and rallies in the central plaza involving thousands of people, coordinated with blockades in and around the city. These actions were met with brutal repression, including by riot police that the government contracted from La Paz. After several days of face-offs between the military and protestors, the people of Cochabamba successfully kicked out this transnational corporation and reclaimed the public water supply. As anthropologist Robert Albro noted:

The international arena of so-called anti-globalization activism took immediate notice. If the shattered windows and gutted interiors of a Starbucks symbolized 1999’s “Battle in Seattle,” Bolivia’s Water War in the following year quickly became the next symbol. As a civil revolt against the privatization and mercantilization of citizenship life, the Water War became the “poster child for what happens when a poor country is left to the whims of global economic planners,” and a “global wakeup call against economic oppression in the world.”16

After the massive street demonstrations, negotiations between movement leaders, company officials, and local politicians took place within SEMAPA. The coordinadora could not translate broad-scale mobilization into an effective style of management of public services. In addition, the legal procedures under which negotiations could be made and decisions approved favored the municipal political elites
who supported privatization. Fierce elite resistance ultimately undermined the construction of a truly democratic and participatory water governance structure. In particular, the mayor continued to maintain ultimate authority and control during negotiations. As a result of some of these power grabs, Spronk argues, “SEMAPA has gone from one crisis to the next. Since the company was returned to public hands after the Water War of 2000, two general managers have been dismissed for acts of corruption.”

Activists launched a similar mobilization in El Alto in 2005, several years after their initial concession. The price increases, along with the failure to provide adequate service to outlying communities, infuriated residents. Interim president Carlos Mesa assured angry alteños (residents of El Alto) that he would terminate the contract with Aguas del Illimani. However, he later revised his promise with this explanation: “One needs to yield to the international financial institutes, as the public treasury is empty and no one else can pay the wages.”

As a key activist, Alfredo Yujra, a self-employed blacksmith in El Alto, described to us:

That’s how it all started . . . after the gas wars, like I told you in 2003, we started organizing seminars, and we began to understand more and more how these transnational companies were profiting off of our natural resources. So we started organizing . . . We started with our base community organizations. We had to encourage our bases to take to the streets, each neighborhood organization [junta] had to inform the bases; when the bases are informed well . . . there is no stopping them. And the whole pueblo rose to mobilize.

Residents’ organizations relied on the internal articulation of different levels of organizings from neighborhoods to zones to city to the executive structure of La Federación de Juntas Vecinales de El Alto (Federation of Neighborhood Councils of El Alto), or FEJUVE, to undertake actions. This flexible and hierarchically connected organizational structure made mobilization quite effective due to the dense networks of residents’ units with a territorial base in each neighborhood. Similar to Cochabamba’s coordinadora, the FEJUVE in El Alto served as an umbrella, bringing communities together to express their discontent. By the same token, each neighborhood could provide information about its own set of problems and demands to higher structures of the organization.

The FEJUVE, frustrated by the lack government response to its demands, announced an indefinite general civic strike toward the end of November 2005. The Mesa administration finally offered to review the contract with Aguas del Illimani, so that, in the case that some irregularities or cause for breach could be found, the entire process could end with the company’s “legal” and “peaceful” exit. The people of El Alto agreed to rejoin the dialogue, unwavering in their demand that the company leave but giving the government until mid-December to comply. The resolu-
tion of this conflict was postponed several years after Mesa resigned in disgrace. In the end, the problem of water privatization was solved at the top of the political hierarchy, far removed from spheres of neighborhood-based participation.22

The political situation changed dramatically with the election of Evo Morales and his Movement for Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo, or MAS) party in 2005, as the recovery of natural resources became a critical part of his national agenda. MAS is a conglomeration of social movements, formed in the mid-1980s as a party that stood against neoliberalism and proposed (a) the nationalization of all state-based industries and (b) the incorporation of the majority indigenous population into state making through the writing of a new constitution. Issues of water and water delivery are a critical part of this new constitution, as several of its articles discuss water as an essential human right, not to be bought or sold. According to Pablo Solón, Bolivia’s ex-chief climate negotiator and representative to the UN: “‘The new Constitution expands, extends and deepens the rights of all Bolivians, especially indigenous people and other groups.’ Among other things, Bolivia’s new Constitution guarantees ownership of natural resources, as well as ownership of state enterprises by the Bolivian people ‘to prevent the recurrence of any processes of privatization of state corporations and natural resources that we saw over the past 25 years.’”23

By the end of 2006, the Ministry of Water (created by the new MAS government) negotiated the terms of Aguas del Illimani’s termination with the company’s shareholders and international donors. The Bolivian government compensated Suez $5.5 million for lost investments and formed a temporary water company, La Empresa Pública Social de Agua y Saneamiento (the Public and Social Enterprise of Water and Sanitation), or EPSAS. EPSAS was intended to be a transitional company, responsible for water delivery, while stakeholders negotiated a new management structure. The initial plan involved the creation of a panel of representatives from the two municipalities (El Alto and La Paz), their respective neighborhood organizations, and federal agencies, which together would eventually reach some form of long-term solution.

Municipal agents from La Paz developed a framework called Agua Para Todos, or “Water for All.”24 This plan would involve one company based in El Alto, with representatives from national, regional, and municipal governments and neighborhood organizations making decisions about larger-scale infrastructure, along with separate water companies in each city to handle municipal infrastructure according to local preferences. Funding would come from a combination of user fees, foreign aid and investment, and federal funds. In contrast, members of the FEJUVE in El Alto preferred an autonomous and locally funded company, with more emphasis on transparency, participatory governance, and local control.

FEJUVE representatives were suspicious of the paceño (i.e., a person from La Paz) plan and described it as the same old politics favoring transnational interests.
There was doubt, on the part of the FEJUVE, regarding adequate and fair water distribution in El Alto, and the federation believed that its plan might only exacerbate the already uneven distribution of resources between these cities. As Juan del Granado, an active member of the FEJUVE, argued, “This new water company will be a carbon copy of Aguas del Illimani.”

Evaluating the relative merits of these proposals is not a straightforward endeavor. While in both cases much of the responsibility for infrastructure would rest with the municipality, the El Alto program, *Agua Para Todos*, recognizes the need for federal support and regional coordination to deal with larger-scale projects of finding alternative water resources and rerouting flows to cities. At the same time, the *alteños*’ concerns over losing control of their resources to a wealthier municipality, local elites, or transnational corporations are very real. After more than two and a half years of meetings, debates, and negotiations, stakeholders have failed to reach any form of consensus, and EPSAS continues to provide water and sanitation services to these cities. Interestingly, however, neither plan, for La Paz or for El Alto, pays more than lip service to global warming and the potential for increasing water scarcity in the region.

The Bolivian water wars and the international lawsuits held against transnational corporations raise fundamental questions about democracy and the relationship between local forms of governance, state structures, and the international arena. They argue that while, in both cases, movements comprising civil society gained much at the national level, they were unable to hold international actors accountable. For example, private corporations can sue for damages, while citizens of host states do not have an institutionalized arena in which to take direct action. The cases of both the *cochabambinos* (residents of Cochabamba) and the *alteños* illustrate that mechanisms need to be established at the international arena. For example, they suggest a strengthening of international human rights laws. Until this is the case, water justice will continue to depend primarily on strengthening the capacity of local states for regulation and service delivery. Even in a moderately progressive moment in Bolivia under the current leadership of Morales, the nation continues to remain dependent on extractive industries and the revenue from the sale of natural resources such as gas to wealthier nations to fund social programming. Bolivian movement activists are highly aware of this unevenness between nation-states. For example, a major plank of the Bolivian position on climate change is the climate debt owed by powerful nations to the global South to help them deal with related problems such as water scarcity. Even in the unlikely event that this debt is forthcoming, it would likely be with strings attached to benefit more powerful nations. State agents and social movements attempting to build a just system of water governance are likely to remain trapped in this age-old and vicious cycle of having to surrender sovereignty to more powerful nation-states defining national policy.
Global Warming and Water Governance

Thus far, we have highlighted the great successes and challenges of obtaining water justice in the twenty-first century for citizens of Cochabamba and El Alto. The problems of population pressures, lack of financial resources and expertise, and changing hydrology all present ongoing obstacles for social movements. Privatization schemes exacerbated inequalities, left whole communities out of distribution zones, and turned collective resources into alienable objects of foreign control. While the resulting mobilizations were critical in halting this process, in this last section, we query whether movements will be able to move from the politics of protest to constructing new forms of governance capable of prioritizing access and protecting scarce resources.

While residents of the central valley (Cochabamba and surrounding communities) have long been aware of water scarcity as an ecological issue, this is a relatively new discussion in El Alto and La Paz. Climate change is a slow and gradual phenomenon, and it is not necessarily easy to predict how it will interact with processes like urbanization to alter water availability. As evidenced by a sudden growth in scientific and popular publications in Bolivia, along with conferences and tribunals, the potential effects of climate change on the water supply of large urban centers evoke considerable anxiety. For example, seasonal water scarcity has hit La Paz and El Alto, prompting state-imposed conservation campaigns. Global warming has the potential to affect communities nationwide. As Alvaro Díaz Astete, an anthropologist who has lived and worked with the Uru Chipaya (the oldest indigenous community in the Andes), argues: “It’s a dual cause: climate change and greater competition. The result is an extremely grave threat to this culture. I am very worried.”

Two potential consequences of climate change are that wet seasons will be wetter and dry seasons drier throughout the country and that glaciers will no longer act as water reservoirs. Bolivia contains 20 percent of the world’s tropical glaciers, which remain frozen only because of the high altitude of the Andes. Due to rising temperatures and inadequate precipitation, Andean glaciers have been in retreat throughout the second half of the twentieth century; from 1970 to 2006, they experienced a 30 percent decline in surface area. These glaciers play a critical role in buffering seasonal water variation in the high Andes, and their loss has important implications for downstream communities. Adaptive strategies to deal with these changing conditions — for example, wide-scale use of rain or groundwater and water conservation — are likely to strain the weak regulatory capacity of the state. Although Bolivia is not as arid as some regions of the globe, it is among a large number of countries that will face economic water scarcity; it lacks the technical expertise and resources for large-scale infrastructural development to address the problem, and each potential solution (e.g., building new dams and pumping groundwater) is likely to exacerbate declining environmental quality.
Social movements will be critical in continuing to prevent transnational corporations from cashing in on increasing water scarcity and in building alternative forms of governance. Social movements, NGOs, and rural indigenous organizations have indeed come together in a broad-based effort to explore the potential effects of global warming, forming the Platform for Climate Change. The platform — led by the secretaries of natural resources and rural social movements and collectively representing over 3 million people — was founded in 2009 to develop proposals to combat climate change through national policies in Bolivia and proposals for international action. It has put significant pressure on nations with higher carbon emissions and suggested adaptation strategies to deal with changes that are already under way. At the national level, the platform has been active in promoting the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth, which moves toward a model of living in harmony with nature by shifting to renewable technologies and applying indigenous and ancestral knowledge in sustainable management of the environment. The platform has also organized an international conference on climate change, primarily in response to the failure of the UN conference on climate change in Copenhagen in December 2009. In 2010 it called for a World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba, whereby it brought together thirty-five
thousand people (of whom nine thousand were from outside Bolivia), representing social movements, governments, scientists, and academics, to discuss the effects of climate change on poorer nations. The results of the conference were presented and collated into a document titled the “People’s Agreement.”

Although the platform recognizes water scarcity as a primary global warming–related concern in Bolivia, it focuses almost exclusively on the consequences of this issue for rural communities. However, as many of our interlocutors have noted, far more people will be affected in cities like Cochabamba and El Alto. Some of the participating NGOs, such as Agua Sustentable (a Bolivian-based NGO focused on water justice), are working with residents of El Alto to store more water in the rainy season for the drier parts of the year. At an international level, they are involved in conversations pushing the Human Rights Council to recognize the impacts of glacier melt on rural communities in Bolivia as a violation of human rights and the responsibility of major greenhouse gas–emitting states for this crime. For example, they have argued that these states should support funding for the infrastructure for water conservation, storage, and distribution.

The main political engine of El Alto, the FEJUVE, however, has not been involved in the platform’s broad-based organizing, nor has there been a real urban presence in conversations focusing on water scarcity. As a recent New York Times article suggested, “If the water problems are not solved, El Alto . . . could perhaps be the first large urban casualty of climate change.” Meanwhile, ex—“water warriors” continue to face major obstacles in achieving just forms of water governance. While there is some degree of overlap between these movements, there is relatively little communication between climate change and water governance activists. Building on the success of the water wars will likely necessitate coalitions between members of these movements and equally effective means of rapid mobilization, not just to protest unjust forms of governance, but to support just ones.

On a recent trip to Bolivia in the summer of 2010, as part of our collaborative project on climate change and water scarcity, the contradiction became increasingly apparent between water activists focused on building a new social justice water company and the dire need for new water sources that might “usurp resources” from rural communities. This absence of water in a moment of radical climate change could possibly heighten competition and create new inequalities between rural and urban residents. Further, thinking about the enormous costs of rerouting water from rural to urban areas of Bolivia takes activists on an imaginary journey of petitioning for foreign investment, which holds its own set of contradictions, as we have seen from earlier water-related struggles.

On a cold day in July, we traveled with a few representatives from the FEJUVE–El Alto to see for ourselves where and how they will access water for their new public water company. We traveled through green mountainous regions of highland Bolivia, finally reaching our destination after several hours of being
trapped in a small minivan. Through the steamy windows, we could see an aqua-blue and limitless reserve of water. One FEJUVE member joked, “Everyone is so worried about climate change and water scarcity, . . . but this will provide enough for La Paz and El Alto for the next one hundred years.” What the organizers failed to mention is that this water supply belonged not to the municipality of El Alto but to local rural comuneros (joint holder of tenure land) who depended upon it for local forms of agriculture. While FEJUVE members fantasized about rerouting this water toward municipal centers, they also spoke about the ways they would finance and support their own autonomous water company. One FEJUVE leader commented: “We will seek funding from international donors like the European Union or private capital from Japan. . . . This will give us the money we need to build this water company based upon Aymara principals of social justice and reciprocity.” What is interesting about this encounter with the FEJUVE representatives is that they spoke rather unproblematically about diverting water resources from local agricultural communities, exacerbating age-old divisions between urban and rural residents. While the water wars managed to mobilize discontent across these historic divides between rural and urban areas, water scarcity posed new threats and dangers for conflicts among and between communities. Moreover, their fantasy about borrowing money from the European Union or Japan suggests the probability of continued foreign domination of resources management.

In both Cochabamba and El Alto, the challenge of building a truly public water management system continues to be complicated by issues of climate change and scarcity. This layering of problems — bureaucratic and ecological — makes the role of social movements both necessary and more challenging to coordinate. As one of the water warriors from Cochabamba explained,

First, in 1985 a new model was implanted in the country, a neoliberal model based in two fundamental points: the privatization of the entire economic system and the handing over of natural resources to transnational corporations. This model . . . worsened the economic situation of the country. . . . One could see, little by little, how the communities, how the people were being left without their natural resources, how the state companies were transferred to private transnational corporations, and how there were no benefits to the population.31

This pillaging of natural resources served as impetus for street-level protests, which have been recognized globally for their success. However, the difficulty of moving from this form of resistance to a truly democratic and participatory water governance structure remains a challenge. Questions now center on whether movements like the FEJUVE in El Alto or the coordinadora in Cochabamba will be able to mobilize across race, class, and regional divides in order to address complex issues such as coordinated water conservation to protect increasingly limited resources.
As we have seen, Bolivia’s broad-based social movements and collective structures managed to reverse a model of private management of water; yet it is too early to tell whether these organizations will be flexible and adaptable enough to build a water management system that is truly based upon the principles of social justice and equality.

Notes
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2. Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 39. Indian *ayllu* communities (basic political and social units of pre-Columbian Andean communities) were divided into *encomiendas*, which were rights to the use of Indian labor given to the Spanish. The *ayllus* were once based upon fictive kin configurations that organized work and distributed land and productive resources among their members. Indians were allowed to hold and use communal property and to maintain rights to self-governance, but they had to contribute their labor to the Crown and pay tribute taxes. This form of labor was referred to as *mit’a*.

3. Ibid.


12. Felipe Quispe (member of FEJUVE), interview by the authors, El Alto, Bolivia, July 21, 2010.

13. See Laurie and Crespo, “Deconstructing the Best Case Scenario.”


18. Spronk, “After the Water Wars.”

19. In the wake of the water wars, Sánchez de Lozada was exiled from Bolivia due to the mass mobilizations against his plan to privatize gas. Mesa took over as the interim president.


24. It is important to note that there are historic frictions between La Paz, the older colonial core controlling municipal resources and funding, and El Alto, the newer migrant city, self-constructed and relying upon funding and labor from residents.


26. After Morales declared that the gas would be nationalized, foreign companies were forced to sign new contracts that recognized the state as the legal owner of the hydrocarbons extracted from Bolivian soil, but their daily operations changed very little. While the new tax decreased their profit potential, increasing prices made the decreases to their profit margins less significant. In addition, the rents paid after the nationalization were similar to the rents most of the investors paid in other parts of the world. These changes have allowed Morales to use the profits from Bolivia’s hydrocarbon sector both to stabilize the economy and to pursue an array of redistributive programming.


29. The agreement calls for emissions to be reduced so that the world’s average temperature is only increased by a maximum of one degree Celsius. To account for developed countries’ historical responsibility and the climate debt they have accrued, it suggests that they should give 6 percent of their respective gross domestic products to climate adaptation funds. These would be managed by national governments at the UN, not by the World Bank. There were more detailed proposals for specific areas such as sustainable agriculture and forestry, technology transfer, support for those forced to migrate due to climate change, and the need for an International Climate and Environmental Justice Tribunal and a Universal Declaration of Mother Earth’s Rights. For more on the “People’s Agreement,” see Bolivia Information Forum, “Climate Change,” www.boliviainfoforum.org.uk/inside-page.asp?section=3&page=48 (accessed July 28, 2012).

