

# BOOK REVIEWS

---

---

**PRIVATIZING WATER: GOVERNANCE FAILURE AND THE WORLD'S URBAN WATER CRISIS** by Karen Bakker, Orient Blackwan Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2012, pp 303, Rs 695/-

Karen Bakker deserves appreciation for the herculean task of gathering in-depth source and research material on privatizing water, governance failure and the world's urban water crisis. It is a precious outcome of 15 years of hard work which began with the British drought of 1995.

The book introduces the problem of privatization and urban water crisis by referring to the event at World Water Forum, The Hague 2000 - 'No to Water privatization' and 'Yes to water as a Human Right'. The reason for introducing the problem is the failure of the majority of formal private sector activity in water supply in urban areas. Secondly, the central promise of solving the world's urban water made in the 1990s was not respected, thus, leading to urban water supply "crisis". Hence the author calls for reframing the question of privatization in two ways:

Firstly, to examine privatization as an environmental as well as a social economic phenomenon; and to integrate an analysis of privatization with an understanding of the simultaneous and often overlapping roles played by the government, private and community actors.

Primarily she focuses on three questions:

1. Why is privatization promoted as a preferred alternative for managing urban water supply?
2. Can privatization fulfill its proponents' expectations, particularly with respect to water supply to the urban poor?
3. Given the apparent shortcomings of both privatization and conventional approaches to government provision, what are the alternatives?

The author tackles questions by appealing to broader debates over the role of the private sector in development, the role of urban communities

in the provision of “public” service concept of “governance failure” as a means of exploring the limitations faced by private companies and governments.

The book is divided into two parts. In Part I, she critically examines the concept of development, urbanization and the governance of thirst and in Part II, the invitation is to go ‘Beyond privatization: debating alternatives’. She approaches the topics with validly drawn data and figures from various research institutes. She also duly acknowledges in the introduction that this “book contains or draws material in previously published articles” (p.xi).

Chapter one presents three modes of urban water supply; government, private and community and each of these methods has flaws which are depicted in “state failure”, “market failure” and “governance failure”. It also highlights the plight of poor families and scarcity of affordable water.

Chapter two addresses constructing ‘public’ water. Water-related problems after World War II are explained.

Chapter three is an expansion of private sector involvement in urban water supply. The author opens with a story of three big city neighbours which mirrors the daily reality of many urban residents around the world. The rich and poor use different types of water supply technologies from highly industrialized to an artisan. This brings out the fact that the “public” and “private” are more complicated than often realized, this complexity associated with diverse types of technologies used for supplying water.

This book also highlights that water is life and water democracy needs to be promoted collectively. Campaigns against water are considered as campaigns for human right to water. Taking cues from South Africa, the advantages and disadvantages of the human rights are illustrated. The UN committee defined the right to water as: “The human right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic use”. The human right to water raises the issue of justifiability (with economic, social and cultural rights). In this sense, anti-privatization activists call themselves “water warriors”. Examples of the ‘Rethinking Community’ raised questions with regard to over-consumption of water by wealthy

households, the disinterest of the city mayor and political elites in extending the water supply to the poor, inefficient management, and a culture of political exclusion of indigenous farmers all played a role to bring about potential solutions.

### **Critiquing ‘water democracy’**

Thus, understanding the most novel aspect of delegated water governance, partnership is the involvement of a large number of stakeholders representing diverse interests who treat each other more or less as equals, guided by the principle that decision-making should not be left solely to government experts. This increase in community involvement has occurred for a number of reasons, the most important the putative shift from “government” to “governance” in which the non-government actors play a more significant role than in the past, posing challenge to conventional theories of governance. Bakker brings out the ecological impact and derives privatization towards ecological governance and corporate verses community control.

“We cannot categorically refute private sector involvement in water supply, nor simplistically defend government provision”. Her slides have some successful stories and many failures. Today nearly a billion people lack access to adequate water supply and neither the government nor the private sector seems willing to budge from its stance. Further, Bakker regards the inability to provide services such as the water-managed piped provision to the low income localities as a significant failure of the first wave of privatization.

The core of the book argues that public and private sector management does not exhaust the range of alternatives in the water supply sector. Bakker concludes by describing the water supply arrangements in the Brazilian city, Porto Alegre, an exceptional case. The utility in Porto Alegre is government-owned but 40 per cent services are outsourced to the private sector. The utility has the best privatization attributes of government, community and private sectors. Bakker advocates such a tripartite arrangement as the game changer.

Bakker does develop tentative answers that bring in the role of the community and the issue of water as a human right. But the book does not answer the question substantially. It nevertheless is a starting point for more fruitful engagement on the subject.

The book draws the reader into a broader conceptual space in which our criteria for alternatives to conventional, public and private approaches can be refined, and in which wide-ranging debate over urban water governance can flourish. Bakker is provocative and insightful but she fails to make the text, reader friendly. Even then the book demands space on the shelves of utility managers. It is also best for those engaged in water management from the perspective of the poor.

**Anastasia Gill (Sr. Sneha) pbvm**, Indian Social Institute