

The United Church of Canada

WATERS OF LIFE – ISSUES, ETHICS AND ACTIONS

Session 4: Water Issues in the Global Context

This study session is an excerpt from the United Church of Canada's publication: "Waters of Life: Issues, Ethics and Actions: Five Study Sessions for Faith Communities" by David Hallman.

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Study process for Session 4:**Option A (1 hour)**

- Welcome, opening prayer, and song (5 min.)
- Introduce the theme with information from the survey of United Church of Canada global partners (10 min.)

Suggestion 1:

- Participants read stories based on United Church partner surveys (pp.33-38) (10 min.)
- Divide into small groups to discuss the stories (20 min.)
- Gather in plenary for feedback from small groups and general discussion (10 min.)

Suggestion 2:

- View One Drop at a Time, program four of *Spirit Connection*. The accompanying study guide has suggestions for before, during, and after the video. (30 min.)
- Discuss insights gained from the video (10 min.)
- Closing prayer and song (5 min.)

Option B (2½ hours)

- Welcome, opening prayer, and song (10 min.)
- Introduce the theme with information from the survey of United Church of Canada global partners (10 min.)

Suggestion 1:

- View video *Thirst*, regarding water as a human right or saleable commodity (60 min.)
- Break (10 min.)
- In small groups, discuss issues raised in the video, using the study guide (20 min.)
- Gather in plenary for small groups reports and general discussion (30 min.)

Suggestion 2:

- Participants read stories based on United Church partner surveys (pp.33-38) (10 min.)
- Divide into small groups to discuss stories (40 min.)
- Break (10 min.)
- Gather in plenary for small groups reports (20 min.)
- Brainstorm ways of presenting stories to the faith community to raise awareness (35 min.)
- Closing prayer and song (10 min.)

Partnership Survey Story I: Africa

In 2004, The United Church of Canada surveyed its global partner organizations on water scarcity, safety, commodification, and other global water issues. This story from Africa is a perspective from one of these global partners.

Lesotho Highlands Water Project

*by 'Mamosa Nts'aba, Gender Team Member,
Christian Council of Lesotho*

“The area is so dry it hurts. We are dying to get just drops of water,” the 72-year-old Basotho grandmother told me as she waited in line at the local water pump. There was pain in her words – an ache perhaps amplified by the strain of queuing day after day, sometimes for hours, to fill her buckets and provide for her family.

“Basotho” is the name of my people, the people of Lesotho, a tiny mountain kingdom sometimes called “the rooftop of Africa.” It is an agricultural country. Most of its 2.18 million people are farmers and livestock herders who live in Lesotho’s broad fertile mountain valleys.

Water is Lesotho’s greatest natural resource. The runoff from the mountains feeds many rivers and streams, and water-rich underground aquifers generate many natural springs. But these days, it seems our water has become a curse.

In 1986, the former apartheid government of South made a deal with Lesotho government officials. Our water rights were sold and the Lesotho Highlands Water Project was started. The project is a water diversion scheme that, when completed, will consist of five major dams, 200 kilometers of tunnels blasted through the Maluti Mountains, and a 72-megawatt hydropower plant.

The agreement allows South Africa to divert more than two billion cubic meters of water out of Lesotho every year. In return, the Lesotho government receives royalties and hydro-electric power. Basotho have been promised a better life. But promises are one thing, reality another.

Tens of thousands of villagers were displaced when their traditional lands were flooded by the new Mohale Dam and Reservoir. Their houses, fields, graveyards, grazing land and other private and communal resources disappeared under water. Suddenly gone was a way of life that had flourished for generations.

Displaced communities were relocated near urban areas and a compensation fund was established. But applications standards were made impossibly high and many communities have received no benefits. They complain of delayed and inadequate compensation and a lack of provision of schools, clinics and clean water. Their lives have gone from bad to worse.

Also, water has now been privatized. It is sold as a commercial product and even poor 72-year-old grandmothers have to pay. Treating water as a commodity is foreign to us. In traditional Basotho society, water was free.

Many other problems have been linked to the project. The influx of construction workers attracted service providers (including sex trade workers), many from South Africa. They formed large temporary camps near dam construction sites. The increase in the number of HIV/AIDS cases in Lesotho has been attributed in part to this swell in the local population.

There are also ecological and environmental concerns. They include the loss of thousands of hectares of arable or grazing land, downstream reductions in wetlands habitat, less water available downstream for people and wildlife, and reductions in fresh water fisheries. Women are disproportionately affected by the project.

As traditional carriers of water, women now have to walk longer distances to find it. In some rural villages women have to wake at 3 a.m. to

make the long trek to the nearest water pump or spring. Walking in the dark exposes them to robbery and rape, both of which are on the rise. In this country where 50 percent of people live below the poverty line, desperation can lead to criminal behaviour.

Many Basotho believe the water mega-project is the result of the strict “austerity” policies forced on Lesotho by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in exchange for much-needed loans. Lesotho is heavy in debt, about \$735 million (2002). But the costs to ordinary Basotho are enormous. 2003 was a drought year for us, and yet we had to buy our own water back from South Africa. It cost us a fortune!

In all of this, perhaps the greatest indignity suffered by my people is the loss of self-sufficiency and self-esteem.

The Christian Council of Lesotho is doing its best to be a voice for the voiceless in Lesotho. We pray that people of The United Church of Canada will stand with us in our suffering.

Partnership Survey Story I: Asia-Pacific

In 2004, The United Church of Canada surveyed its global partner organizations on water scarcity, safety, commodification, and other global water issues. This story from the Asia-Pacific is a perspective from one of these global partners.

The Struggle for Water among Indigenous Peoples in Cordillera, Philippines

Mornings are golden high up the Cordillera Mountains in Northern Luzon in the Philippines. Here, time creeps so slowly you need to check your watch constantly to make sure the day hasn't snuck past you while you meditate upon mist-covered vegetable terraces. But it is deceiving, this languid splendour. The urgency is etched upon the weathered faces of Mankayan peasants. It quivers in the voices of community leaders concerned about the future of their community as they hear tunnels being drilled below their homes and farmlands, as toxic mine tailings are dumped daily into their rivers and streams, the lifeblood of their community.

The town of Mankayan is home to the indigenous Kankanaeys, other Igorot indigenous peoples and lowlanders who work in the mines. For centuries, its rivers and streams have provided life and bounty to local inhabitants. They were home to diverse forms of plant and animal life. They deliver irrigation crucial for the survival of the farmers and their families. They are key elements for the life of the community.

Since 1936, Lepanto Consolidated Mining Corporation has been ruining the rivers and destroying the crucial watersheds in the area. The corporation operates 301 mining claims covering 4,008 hectares or 1/4 of the total land area in Mankayan. It justifies its practice of dumping mine tailings and wastes straight into the river on the lack of environmental awareness and accountability back then.

In the village of Cabitin, where the streams entwine to journey toward Ilocos Sur, a red orange stain stays on the rocks, boulders and water. The river flows past the tailings dams that Lepanto built to contain the chemical wastes produced from processing gold and copper. The tailings persistently escape to the river and contaminate the water that moves on to irrigate the farms in Abra and Ilocos Sur. Three tailings dams collapsed following typhoons, contaminating rivers and rice fields. The company's attempt to treat the tailings outlet with lime proves futile as the rust-coloured water continues to flow down the river, killing the animals that drink from it and the plants along its banks.

Gina Tanasia, 54, sits calmly beside a wall covered with plastic shower curtains of lilacs and pink roses. On the curtain hangs a picture of her late husband, Gregorio, looking healthy and self-assured as he leans against the railing of Binga tailings dam. Gregorio's death certificate states he died of cardiac arrest, but his family insists he died of cancer. Lepanto Corp. blames the rise in cancer cases on the use of pesticides by the local farmers. Community folks have their own explanation. Tanasia quotes her husband saying before hedged: "Our people are pitiable. They must be wary of the dam. It is contaminating the springs and rivers that lie below." Water samples taken by a research team headed by the University of the Philippines Pahinungod Outreach Program from the rivers and streams in Mankayan that come in contact with the tailings have been found to contain lead and copper in surface water.

Denver Tongacan is a member of the local town council and chair of the association of village councils. He is one of the 3 accused in a case filed by the corporation for "illegal obstruction to permittees or contractors

defined under the Philippine Mining Act of 1995. He and other leaders and members of the community oppose the granting of perpetual water rights to the Lepanto Consolidated Mining Corporation to six of the nine rivers in the area. This will enable the company to generate 500 metric tons of water it needs for gold processing. "If they take our water, how are we going to sustain our farmlands?" When he and other community members saw Lepanto workers laying pipes on the road to their village, they gathered the village people to barricade the site. "First, there were just 20 of us. Before night fell, there were more than 500. We took turns manning the barricades for a week." "We will fight this to the end," says another villager, Dionisio Tipaac.

The people of Mankayan are sorely aware of the struggle of their sisters and brothers in the town of Itogon for their right and access to water. Another mining company, Benguet Corporation, which operated a gold mine in southern Benguet has acquired 59 water permits, 49 of which are located in Itogon. The company has physical control of Itogon's major water sources. It is cornering the extremely profitable contract to supply the water needs of the population in the surrounding cities and towns. For the people of Itogon, this means loss of their free access to local springs and rivers, scarcity of water for their own household and farms and paying for the water supplied by Benguet Corporation.

The trend towards intensified exploitation and privatization of natural resources is characteristic of the neo-liberal, globalization policies that the Philippine Government has adopted. Across the country, Filipinos are resisting these policies. The people of Itogon have been protesting Benguet's Corp.'s water rights application since 1998. The town council of Mankayan resisted the temptation of "economic prosperity" dangled to them by Lepanto Consolidated Mining Corp. and withdrew their earlier endorsement of its mining expansion. UCC-JGER partners, including the Cordillera People's Alliance, the United Church of Christ in the Philippines – Northern Luzon and the Regional Ecumenical Council of Cordillera, have spearhead a broad-based movement, Save the Abra River Movement, to stop the environmental destruction brought about by corporate mining and other commercial endeavors which damage the livelihood of farmers and indigenous peoples and bring people together for the river's healing and renewal.

(This story uses excerpts from the following articles in Hapit, a publication of the Cordillera People's Alliance: "Lepanto Mining in Mankayan," First Quarter 2003; Editorial, July-Sept. 2004; "A Discussion on the Bulk Water Supply Project," Oct. 2004-March 2005. Used with the publishers' permission.)

Partnership Survey Story I: Latin America

In 2004, The United Church of Canada surveyed its global partner organizations on water scarcity, safety, commodification, and other global water issues. This story from Latin America is a perspective from one of these global partners.

Water Issues in El Salvador

by Antonio Pacheco, Executive Director, ADES

The issue of water in El Salvador is serious. I work in the Economic and Social Development Association (ADES), a rural community development organization in the northern part of the department of Cabañas near the border with Honduras. According to a study done by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, the water reserves in our country will be depleted by 2025.

Already there are shortages, as well as the long-standing problem of little access to water for low-income populations. There is contamination (both chemical and bacterial). Some water services are privatized, and costs are high. People and businesses that contaminate the water are rarely sanctioned. Other issues that have a negative impact are the on-going cutting of trees, concentration of land ownership and the building of new roads that are part of the Plan Puebla Panama infrastructure projects.

The government does little to resolve these problems. Economic policies respond more to macro-economic interests. There is no support for sustainable development and the government has never shown interest in the environment. Transnational companies are in control. They are backed by the World Trade Organization as well as national economic elite groups, and all of these are making decisions in close cooperation with one another.

Our association participates in a network of social and non-governmental organizations know as the Lempa Initiative. The Lempa River is the primary water resource in El Salvador, supplying water to the city of San Salvador and other communities. It is contaminated due to dumping by industrial factories as well as raw

sewage. Research by the University of Central America shows high concentrations of arsenic, pesticides, lead and mercury.

Here in Cabañas, a Canadian company is launching the new El Dorado gold and silver mining project that involves an area of 129 square kilometres. This project will soon contaminate the minor rivers of the Copinolapa and Titihuapa, which flow into the Lempa River.

The government also proposes to build at least two big hydroelectric projects in the Lempa basin. One will affect farmers in Cabañas, as well as in San Miguel and in two districts in Honduras. The hydroelectric company is also working on a dam in the municipality of Carolina in the district of San Miguel on the Torola River. The inhabitants have denounced the constant threats by armed men from the electric company. In fact, one of the most outspoken community leaders against the dam was assassinated, many think by the company itself. We work to make the population and the Salvadoran government more aware of the risks that the Lempa River basin faces.

It is possible to address this crisis through national policies, but the government must have a lot of input from the population. We want women and men to have the power to make important decisions over water. The existence and administration of small water systems could be good because men and women would have direct decision-making power over a resource that is vital to our existence.

We hope you will not be scared off by the size of the problem. This is truly a mess and we are moving toward a catastrophe. We have no doubt that the water crisis is the fruit of capitalist development, on which El Salvador is dependent.