

A photograph of Elizabeth Peredo, a woman with dark, curly hair, wearing a dark jacket and a red scarf. She is holding a microphone and appears to be speaking at a public event. In the background, there are framed anatomical diagrams on a wall and a white van with a green logo. The text "Water is the engine of change" is overlaid in large white font on the right side of the image.

"Water is the engine of change"

Photo: CIDSE

All her working life, Elizabeth Peredo has been engaged in defending human and environmental rights. Until August 2015 she was the director of the Bolivian organisation *Fundación Solón* that aims to contribute to people living in harmony with each other in a world of solidarity, with respect for life and nature. From 2000 onwards she shifted her focus from the rights of domestic workers to water rights. "Our fight has become a worldwide model for struggles for water justice."

Interview: Henkjan Laats

What happened in 2000? In early 2000 the ‘Water War’ took place in Cochabamba, Bolivia’s third largest city. It was a series of public protests in response to the privatisation of the city’s municipal water supply and the water price increases. Tensions erupted when the new firm, Aguas del Tunari, a joint venture involving the US multinational Bechtel, dramatically raised water rates. Protests, largely organised through the community initiative, Coalition in Defense of Water and Life, took place in January, February, and April, culminating in tens of thousands of people marching downtown and battling police. One citizen was killed. Finally, on 10 April, 2000, the national government reached an agreement with the Coalition to reverse the privatisation. As a consequence of the ‘Water War’, in 2004, the Irrigation Law was approved, giving family farmers and indigenous peoples control of their irrigation water sources. Worldwide this ‘Water War’ is recognised as one of the most important conflicts undermining globalisation. After this, I decided to dedicate myself to the struggle for the right to water, as the conflict made me realise water is the engine of change.

What role did water play in Bolivia’s political change? The ‘Water War’ was followed by a chain of other water related events that led to radical political change in Bolivia. A second revolt took place in 2005 – this time by community organisations in the city of El Alto. They ousted the French multinational Suez Company from the recently privatised La Paz-El Alto water district. In the same period, activists prevented the use of groundwater for mining purposes in Chili and Bolivia. These events, in which the *Fundación Solón* was very active, crystallised a growing movement demanding popular control of Bolivia’s water and other natural resources. What followed were the ‘Gas Wars’ of 2003 and 2005, the overthrow of two neoliberal presidents, and the subsequent election of Evo Morales and the MAS (Movement Towards Socialism) party as a ‘government of the social movements.’ The Morales government has sought to develop a new institutional framework that positions the state as a direct provider and regulator of water and sanitation services. The Water Ministry, created in 2006, to integrate the functions of water supply and sanitation, water resource management, and environmental protection, is the first of its kind in Latin America. Bolivia’s new constitution, enacted in 2009, proclaims that access to water is a human right, and outlaws its privatisation.

How did this experience influence other countries? The ‘Water War’ and its aftermath helped to inspire a worldwide anti-globalisation movement and provided

a model for struggles for water justice. And in close coordination with the governments of Uruguay and other like-minded countries such as Ecuador, the Bolivian government led the successful push for the recognition of water and sanitation as a human right by the UN in 2010. The same countries are at the forefront of a new international campaign for a UN declaration against water privatisation.

What are the current threats to water in Bolivia? More recently, the government of Bolivia has adopted an unsustainable growth-oriented and extractivist policy. In its National Development Plan, Bolivia aims to become an energetic and agro-industrial power. This policy objective is reflected in plans for the construction of mega-hydropower projects, such as the El Bala, Rio Madera and Rositas dams. If these dams go ahead they will have devastating environmental and social impacts. Moreover, Bolivia plans to extend its agricultural frontier by converting millions of hectares of forests and other natural areas into arable land. Needless to say this would imply massive deforestation and an increased pressure on water resources, causing scarcity and contamination. It is important to understand that in many ways Bolivia is even more vulnerable to water problems than other countries. High temperatures, droughts and floods caused by climate change have harsh impacts on its glaciers and fragile ecosystems. And being a landlocked country, Bolivia’s main waterways and resources, such as the Titicaca Lake, are particularly susceptible to contamination.

Women celebrate ten years after the ‘Water War’.
Photo: Peg Hunter



The extractivist approach will not contribute to the well-being of the Bolivian people. It will violate human and environmental rights and cause increasing inequity and injustice.

What is the role of family farmers and indigenous peoples in the struggle?

Although these recent policy changes are very worrying, I believe that the Bolivian farmers and indigenous peoples are prepared to continue to fight for control of the water that they use for their livelihoods. Our strength is that we consider water as a common good. Irrigation water users' organisations and water cooperatives are still well organised and have developed efficient water management mechanisms, including for dealing with conflicts, and sharing scarce water. Notwithstanding the tendency of becoming more extractivist, the Bolivian government also continues to support water projects for small and

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medium scale farmers, for example by means of the *Programa Mi Agua* (My Water Programme). In 2006, *Fundación Solón* started to organise *Octubre Azul* (Blue October) with about 100 participating organisations, of which many are grassroots farmers' organisations. *Octubre Azul* raises awareness of Bolivia's vulnerability to water problems, and promotes the right to water from four angles: water as a human right, contamination, agriculture and climate change.

What does the future hold?

Thanks to *Octubre Azul* and other water programmes, the Bolivian people and government are increasingly aware of the vulnerability of our water sources. Local governments, communities, and individual farmers are tackling these problems through many initiatives, such as the policy of the municipality of La Paz to improve the city's water management, the joint activities against the contamination of the Titicaca Lake, and there are examples of successful management of small watersheds. It is my conviction that the Bolivian government should not continue its current extractivist development approach, but rather support these promising grassroots initiatives and go back to its original vanguard policy that promotes water as a common good and a human right.



Water contamination due to mining activities in Potosi, Bolivia. Photos: Henkjan Laats

