

Remunicipalization: putting water back into public hands

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Over the past 15 years there has been a significant rise in the number of communities that have taken private water and sanitation services back into public hands – a phenomenon referred to as “remunicipalization”.

What is remunicipalization?

Remunicipalization refers to the return of privatized water supply and sanitation services to public service delivery. More precisely, remunicipalization is the passage of water services from privatization in any of its various forms – including private ownership of assets, outsourcing of services, and public-private partnerships (PPPs) to full public ownership, management and democratic control.

Most cases of remunicipalization around the world have led to the termination of private contracts before they were due to expire. In other cases, local governments have waited until the expiry date to end water privatization.

Between March 2000 and March 2015 researchers documented:

- 235 cases of water remunicipalization in 37 countries, affecting more than 100 million people.
- Locations include Accra (Ghana), Almaty (Kazakhstan), Antalya (Turkey), Bamako (Mali), Bogota (Colombia), Budapest (Hungary), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Conakry (Guinea), Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), Jakarta (Indonesia), Johannesburg (South Africa), Kampala (Uganda), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), La Paz (Bolivia), Maputo (Mozambique) and Rabat (Morocco).
- The number of remunicipalizations in high-income countries doubled between 2010 and 2015 (104 cases) compared to between 2005 and 2009 (55 cases).
- Public water operators are joining forces within countries and across borders to facilitate the remunicipalization process.

Why are cities remunicipalizing?

Remunicipalization is often a collective response to the failures of water privatization and PPPs, including lack of infrastructure investments, tariff hikes and environmental hazards. These failures have persuaded communities and policy-makers that the public sector is better placed to provide affordable, accessible, quality services to citizens. The research found that the factors leading to water remunicipalization are similar worldwide, such as:

- Poor performance (Accra, Dar es Salaam, Jakarta)
- Under-investment in infrastructure (Berlin, Germany; Buenos Aires; Latur, India)
- Poor water quality (Rennes, France; Cameron, Canada)
- Disputes over operational costs and price increases (Almaty; Maputo; Santa Fe, USA)
- Soaring water bills (Buenos Aires, Jakarta, La Paz, Kuala Lumpur)
- Environmental hazards (Hamilton, Canada)
- Monitoring difficulties (Atlanta, USA; Berlin; Paris; Arenys de Munt, Spain)

¹ This text is an excerpt from “Remunicipalization: A practical guide for communities and policy makers”, originally published as part of the Water Justice Toolkit in 2016 (www.blueplanetproject.net/index.php/water-justice-toolkit/). The guide contains a comprehensive list of sources and references.

- I Lack of financial transparency (Grenoble, France; Paris; Stuttgart, Germany)
- I Workforce cuts and poor service levels (Antalya, Atlanta)

What have been the results of remunicipalization?

While each case differs, there is strong evidence that remunicipalization brings immediate cost savings, operational effectiveness, increased investment in water systems, and higher levels of transparency. In many instances, remunicipalization has offered a chance to make public water services more accountable and participatory, and to build environmentally sustainable models.

More Resources

Remunicipalization: Putting Water Back into Public Hands. 5-minute video animation (English, Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, German, Turkish, Greek): www.youtube.com/watch?v=BISM1TPm_k8

Our Public Water Future: The global experience with remunicipalization (English, French, Catalan, Italian), April 2015: www.tni.org/en/publication/our-publicwater-future

Global list of remunicipalizations, March 2015: www.tni.org/files/download/ourpublicwaterfuture-02_global_list.pdf

Here to Stay: Remunicipalisation as a global trend (English, French, Japanese, Portuguese, Turkish, Chinese and German), November 2014: www.tni.org/en/publication/here-to-stay-waterremunicipalisation-as-a-global-trend www.municipalservicesproject.org/publication/remunicipalisation-putting-water-back-publichands.

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