

Water – Not Just a Human Right but an Essential Public Service

I speak on behalf of the European Federation of Public Service Trade Unions. EPSU represents 8 million public service workers in over 215 trade unions throughout Europe including those who work in the water and sanitation sectors.

We in Europe have a unique role to play in the debates on how water and sanitation should be provided to people in the developing world. Our history provides some important lessons that must not be forgotten. Was it the private sector that invested shareholders money in the construction of water supplies to our towns and cities? Was it the private sector that recognised the health dangers of poor or non existent sanitation and who invested their millions in sewage treatment works and pipes to take away the waste from our homes and streets? No. It was local communities and their local municipalities who started on the road to universal water supplies and full sewerage systems. It was governments who recognised the wisdom of investing public money in water and sanitation. Lets be honest – the private sector are very much the latecomers to the party. They have waited until the hard work was done and now they want to exploit the assets paid for by the public for their own gain and enrichment.

This public investment didn't happen because of some overriding political ideology but because ordinary people needed water for their basic daily needs. They needed safe sanitation for their children's health and well being. They demanded these services from their municipalities and their governments. Is there any other public service as essential to life as water and sanitation?

In London where I work it was not until the 19 century when MPs in parliament got fed up of the stink that came from the River Thames when they decided to raise taxes to pay for the construction of a sewer network throughout London. The result was startling in that the streets of London no longer stunk of shit and children lived longer more healthy lives. According to the medical profession sanitation is the most effective measure that can be taken to improve the health of children.

We should not be surprised therefore that our brothers and sisters in Africa, South America and Asia reject the concept of water for profit. By far the great majority of people in the developing world regard water and sanitation services as something that all people deserve irrespective of their ability to pay. It is seen as a vital public service on par with health care and education. It's what defines decency and civilisation. Even today people are fighting to uphold the public service status of water in the face of aggressive strategies to privatise. Earlier this month violence broke out in Mali when some trade union protesters campaigning against water privatisation were attacked with the result that one man was shot dead. Water and sanitation must never be treated as just another consumer commodity to be bought in the market place. How can we expect poor subsistence labourers to pay for essential water supplies?

Here in Europe, EPSU has been campaigning consistently for Europe's water services to be kept out of the European Commission's liberalisation plans. So far we have succeeded where for example Energy has succumbed. However we recognise that water services have to be paid for – they don't come for free even in Africa.

We recognise that water services need investment and development and that public authorities have to raise funds to pay for this. Traditionally in Europe they have done this through a combination of taxes, charges and debt. In the developing world because the tax take is so small this is not usually sufficient and this is where international donors come in with grants and loans to make up the gap. Water infrastructure represents a long term investment that will benefit generations of people to come. It is right therefore that the costs of investment are repaid by the public authorities over a long period of time. Many critics have said that it is economically impossible to provide full piped sewage systems to the slums found on the fringes of most towns and cities. We have looked into this and we believe that this is mistaken. It can and should be done especially in the densely populated slums where infant mortality is usually highest and the potential benefits are enormous. Our report 'Sewerage Works' is available from the PSIRU Web Site – www.psirru.org

EPSU has also been working closely with the Public Services International (PSI) to develop various methodologies designed to

improve the provision of water and sanitation in the developing world. Arguably the most important of these is the Public Public Partnerships (PUPS) initiative. In 2007 the UN agreed to adopt this approach and set up the GWOPs programme within UN Habitat. This aims to twin public water authorities together to encourage mutual learning and development. Europe's many public water utilities have the potential to do much more to help here. We need to remember that over 90% of the world's water services are in the hands of the public sector. If we have any hope of achieving the millennium development goals we must devote more attention to improving the capacity of **public** utilities to fulfil their objectives for water and sanitation. Many people are also becoming concerned that the GWOP initiative is being commandeered by the private sector rather than to provide opportunities for one public utility to help another on a strict not for profit basis. EPSU believes such an approach has a great potential to help nations achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

Even though the UK Government has accepted the principle that water is a fundamental human right. It can't be left there. We must define what we mean by a human right. A right to what? Each country will need to develop an interpretation of what that right should mean for them and for their people. It is difficult to think of a definition that would suit all circumstances. In fact this issue should not be determined in a top down fashion but should emerge from debate and consideration – on a cross sectoral basis - within each country concerned.

Next March will see the World Water Forum take place in Istanbul. This will be another international jamboree dominated by the major donors and the private sector. But it nevertheless offers an opportunity for trade unions and civil society to cooperate and work together to counteract the dominant liberalisation ideology. All of us who care about the desperate state of water and sanitation services should do everything possible to insist that every country places water and sanitation services at the top of their priorities for investment. Without that all our efforts in health and education will come to very little. EPSU and PSI will be there fighting for water to be recognised as a human right and an essential public service. I hope you will all be there to join us.

Thank you.
Steve Bloomfield EPSU/UNISON