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# THIRST FOR PROFIT

## When the private sector grabs our water

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Access to water is a fundamental human right. Yet climate change is drastically reducing everyone's access to water, which 2.2 billion people already lack. But there's worse to come. The private sector is grabbing and polluting this resource at the expense of local populations in order to make profits, further increasing inequalities. Droughts exacerbated by climate change affect agriculture and therefore the economies of the countries that depend on it, contributing to increased poverty, food insecurity and health problems for the inhabitants, particularly in the Global South. Indigenous peoples are also particularly dependent on their access to this resource, and thus vulnerable to water grabbing.

**This report highlights the way large companies are grabbing water for their own profit, at the expense of local populations.**

Water grabbing refers to situations of injustice where a small number of powerful actors take control of reallocating or using water resources to their benefit at the expense of other users or the ecosystems. **It is part of a neo-colonial logic aimed at satisfying the consumption needs of the countries of the North at the expense of the countries of the South.**

Taking advantage of the lack of regulation and economic inequalities, rich countries and multinationals easily shift water pressure to poorer countries by :

- withdrawing and polluting water for industrial needs (17% of global water withdrawals). These withdrawals sometimes take place in arid regions or in situations of water stress: Texas, Niger, Peru, South Africa, etc.
- importing water-intensive products : fruit, vegetables, meat, flowers, bottled water. One million bottles are sold worldwide every minute. The bottled water industry is drawing on reserves that are supposed to be the common good, selling them for 150 to 1,000 times more than tap water.

Agriculture accounts for 70% of withdrawals, consuming water through irrigation systems that support the meat industry (33% of cereals) and biofuels (10%). It takes the equivalent of twice the size of the Dead Sea or 86 million Olympic swimming pools to produce the biodiesel consumed in Europe (214 km<sup>3</sup> of water). These rare resources are extracted from the South of the planet to quench Europe's thirst for fuel. The richest countries, which are the main consumers of meat, are the main responsible for this industry.

These major violations of fundamental rights and the environment are permitted by governments that either fail to regulate or actively participate in this capture. Neither good practice nor the tools available to companies are sufficient. For example, **despite drought restrictions, companies can sometimes continue to pump water from resources. Danone, in May 2023, continued to extract water from aquifers despite the restrictions that applied to local populations, in full legality.** In the same year, the company made profits of almost 900 million euros and paid out 1.2 billion euros in dividends to its shareholders. In addition, governments sometimes authorise, against a broad consensus on the long-term threat to the resource, for economic interests, or even subsidise private installations (irrigation systems, for example in France, which only benefit the agro-industry, whose cereals are largely exported instead of serving local populations).

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**Oxfam France's recommendations :**

- **Initiate an international discussion to better regulate the use of water by the private sector.**
- **Take into account the historic responsibility of governments: ensure ambitious funding for adaptation in developing countries and universal access to water.**
- **Transforming our farming system by adopting agro-ecological practices.**

## INTRODUCTION

Access to water is a fundamental human right.<sup>1</sup> Yet 1 in 3 people globally do not have access to safe and affordable drinking water.<sup>2</sup> About half of the world's hospital beds are filled with people suffering from a water-related disease.<sup>3</sup> It is expected that by 2050, climate change will deprive 1.5 billion more people of access to water.<sup>4</sup> Climate change is therefore affecting the fundamental right of access to water, and indirectly all the other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

All over the world, the private sector is making the situation worse by drawing on and polluting these scarce resources at the expense of local populations. Agriculture alone uses around 70%<sup>5</sup> of natural water resources and the industry counts for approximately 16%<sup>6</sup>. This has made water big business. The global water market size<sup>7</sup> was estimated at about USD \$500 billion in 2021.<sup>8</sup> This paper describes how the private sector puts access to water at risk and inflicts damage on the environment.

## THE IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON ACCESS TO WATER RESOURCES

### A decline in the resource's quantity and quality due to climate change

Climate change is affecting the global water cycle. The Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) Working Group I (WGI) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded that human-driven climate change has exacerbated water scarcity, led to declines in water quality, and increase in water-related hazards such as floods and droughts. The report states that “ *Some extreme weather events are increasing in frequency and (or) severity as a result of climate change (high confidence). These extreme events, coupled with high vulnerability and exposure in many parts of the world, turn into disasters and affect millions of people every year.*”<sup>9</sup>

In 2018, 3,6 billion people did not have enough access to water for at least a month. At approximately 2°C of climate warming above pre-industrial levels, between 0.9 and 3.9 billion people are projected to be at increased exposure to water stress, depending on regional patterns of climate change and the socioeconomic scenarios considered.<sup>10</sup> Vulnerability to water-related impacts of climate change and extreme weather is projected to intensify in the future. Globally, 10% of the most water-stressed basins account for 35% of global irrigated calorie production,<sup>11</sup> and food production is at risk in those basins, mainly in low-income countries.<sup>12</sup> Globally, between 1961 and 2006, it has been estimated that 25% yield loss occurred<sup>13</sup> as a result of droughts, floods, storms, direct consequences of climate change through the modification of the water cycle.

Oxfam showed in its Water Dilemma report<sup>14</sup> how the expected rise in global temperature and change in precipitation will make the population vulnerable, with half of those impacted residing in South Asia, followed by Central Asia, West Africa and East Asia.<sup>15</sup>

### ...reinforcing already significant inequalities in access to water, with unacceptable consequences for human and social rights

Water security<sup>16</sup> is strongly connected with food security and health. Therefore, water insecurity can lead to different types of threats. Droughts have direct consequences on drinking water and water sanitation and hygiene (WASH). It also affects yields, threatening food security, and the economy and can become a driver of poverty. Water scarcity is also lowering water quality leading to disease and affecting the health of populations.

FAO<sup>17</sup>, IPCC<sup>18</sup> and UNWater<sup>19</sup> reports show evidence of the disproportional impacts of these threats on women and children. Therefore, water insecurity exacerbates gender inequalities. According to the World Health Organization, Women and girls are responsible for fetching water in 7 out of 10 households without supplies on-premises, compared with 3 in 10 households for their male peers.<sup>20</sup> Climate change therefore reinforces gender inequalities such as unpaid care work and the probability of girls remaining out of school as they are needed for the water related supplies, or as workforce.

Access to water also has particular importance for Indigenous people. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) makes explicit reference to water among the natural resources with which indigenous peoples have a right “to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship” and to “uphold their responsibilities to future generations,” in relation to “traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used [...] waters” (Article 25).<sup>21</sup>

Some of the other groups requiring particular attention concerning water and sanitation include children, minority groups, older persons, persons with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ communities<sup>22</sup>, refugees and residents in rural and deprived urban areas, and victims of natural disasters and persons in disaster-prone areas.<sup>23</sup>

700 million people around the world could be forced to move because of a worsening water shortage by 2030.<sup>24</sup> Flood, as a consequence of precipitation intensification and variations, is also a driver of these movements.

Africa is home to half the people who drink water from unprotected sources, particularly in the Sub-Saharan region of the continent where only 24% of the population has access to a safe source of drinking water. It is also on this same continent that hunger continues to increase, while it stagnates or decreases everywhere else.<sup>25</sup>

## WATER GRABBING IN THE TIMES OF SCARCITY: ROLE OF PRIVATISATION AND COMMODIFICATION

### Water stress and water grabbing

Despite the rapid decline in the quantity and quality of freshwater worldwide, the global water demand continues to rise: since 1900, it has increased eightfold, while the world's population has only increased by a factor of 4.7. At this rate, global water demand is set to continue rising by 20% to 30% by 2050.<sup>26</sup>

Globally, industry and agriculture account for almost 90% of total water consumption.<sup>27</sup> It is estimated that agriculture and industrial waters worldwide contribute 15% to water stress.<sup>28</sup>

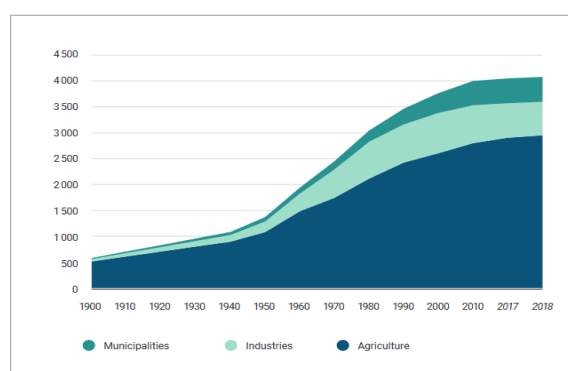


Fig. 1: Evolution of global water withdrawals, 1900-2018 (km<sup>3</sup>/year).

Source: FAO (2022, fig. 1.23, p.71, based on Aquastat)

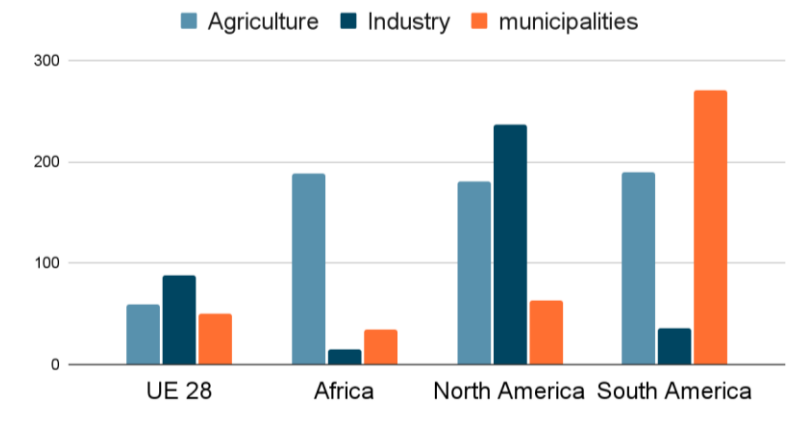


Fig. 2: Water withdrawal per region (km<sup>3</sup> in 2020).

Source: FAO, Aquastat.

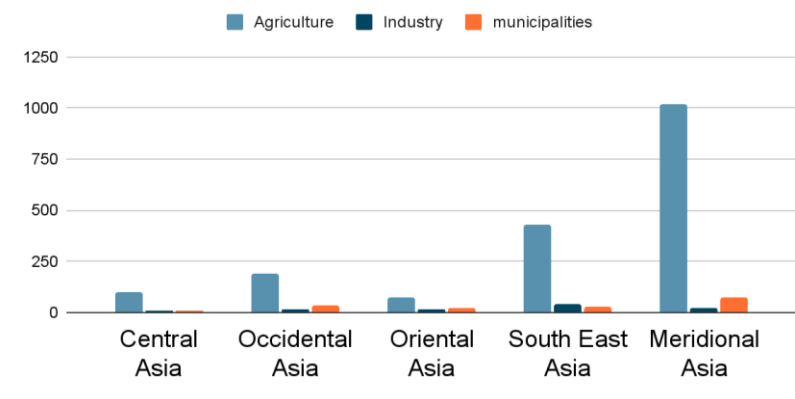


Fig. 3: Water withdrawal per region in Asia (km<sup>3</sup> in 2020).

Source: FAO, Aquastat

The unsustainable rise in global water consumption is linked to an extractivist<sup>29</sup> and ultra-productivistic<sup>30</sup> economic model in which the consumption of large quantities of natural resources triggers excessive water use, depleting the water commons, further exacerbating shortages and creating a vicious cycle. Climate change catalyses this process, triggering a race for water resources that excludes the most vulnerable. These mechanisms can be referred to as *water grabbing*.

#### What is water grabbing?

Water grabbing refers to situations of injustice where a small number of powerful actors take control of reallocating or using water resources to their benefit at the expense of other users or the ecosystems.<sup>31</sup> The decision-making power around water is captured, including the power to decide how and for what water resources are used, without the free prior and informed consent of local communities. The process can be legal (although non-legitimate), illegal (contrary to the current law), or extralegal (when the legal framework is insufficient).<sup>32</sup>

Water grabbing and land grabbing are intrinsically linked. Land grabbing is a practice used by governments and corporations to urbanise or make a profit on food and energy by acquiring land in a foreign country. This practice leads usually to water grabbing and water degradation, as it is used in agriculture to grow large plantations (for food or agrofuels), mining and other industrial activities.

The mechanism of water grabbing highlights that water scarcity and insecurity are not so much related to the absolute availability of fresh and clean water, but rather stem from the unequal distribution of water among societal groups. In other words, the so-called “water crisis” is less a consequence of generalised scarcity than a manifestation of wealth inequalities and uneven power dynamics.<sup>33</sup> A strong polarisation between the global North and South can be observed. Taking advantage of the economic inequalities between them and inadequate

institutional frameworks,<sup>34</sup> rich countries and multinationals easily shift water pressure to poorer countries (importing water-intensive products, installing polluting industries or biofuel projects, etc.). For example, the increased demand for electronic products in Northern countries relies on the exploitation of rare minerals, often in Southern countries like Latin America, which consumes or pollutes large quantities of water.<sup>35</sup> Flower production for the USA and Europe in vulnerable areas of Kenya and the Andean mountains profoundly affects the quantity and quality of local community water sources, as well as overall livelihood conditions.<sup>36</sup> The overexploitation and pollution of resources are thus facilitated by a neo-colonial logic that drains countries of the South to benefit rich countries, leaving populations and small farmers behind. This is what Boelens and *al.* refer to as “hydro-colonialism”.<sup>37</sup> The Horn of Africa has been facing a dramatic drought since 2017 provoking the worst hunger crisis since 1945 worldwide. However, the Industry extracted 1,000 billion litres of water in this region in 2020.<sup>38</sup> In 2021 and 2022, Ethiopia exported 4.1 billion dollars of goods, 83 % of which were coffee, oils, vegetables, meat and flowers - which are water-consuming goods. Half of these exportations were for the US (9%) and Europe (41%). Broadly, 2 billion dollars of water-consuming goods were exported to the Northern countries, while the country was facing a massive drought.<sup>39</sup>

## **Industrial withdrawals and their impacts**

Industrial water accounts for 16.71% of the world’s water withdrawals.<sup>40</sup> Water is essential for a range of industrial applications. There are huge capitalist interest in water resources as material and energy sources.<sup>41</sup> It is used as a coolant for energy generation in fossil fuel and nuclear power plants or turned into wastewater by certain industrial processes, in the production of microelectronics, or in mining.<sup>42</sup>

There are major, neo-colonial patterns in water use. The proportion of freshwater withdrawn for industrial use is much higher (around 37,7% in 2019)<sup>43</sup> in high-income countries than in low-income countries (2,69%). On a global scale, the United States is the largest user of industrial water, withdrawing over 300 billion m<sup>3</sup> per year (a thousand per inhabitant).<sup>44</sup> That’s enough to cover Arizona or Italy with a pool 1m deep.<sup>45</sup> That's also nine times more, on a per capita basis than China, the second largest (at 140 billion m<sup>3</sup> per year).

Mines, quarries and oil and gas installations consume astronomical quantities of water, even though they are often located in arid or water-stressed regions (like Saudi Arabia, US Texas, Mexico, Niger or South Africa). In Colombia, the oil company Perenco needs to extract nine barrels of water to produce one barrel of oil.<sup>46</sup> An open-circuit nuclear reactor needs to pump out (and then discharge after heating) between 55 and 200m<sup>3</sup> per second.<sup>47</sup>

This endless thirst for the industrial system has dangerous consequences when it competes with vital human needs (for hydration, food and hygiene). For instance, installing a phosphate processing plant in Gabès, Tunisia, has led to the gradual decline of local oases, where farmers are now struggling to survive due to the lack of water.<sup>48</sup> In many areas, residents and environmental groups have raised concerns about the depletion of local groundwater supplies due to water grabbing by industry. In Argentina’s Patagonian provinces, shale gas has met with opposition from both the communities directly concerned in Neuquén province, the traditional Mapuche inhabitants, and downstream farmers in the fruit-growing area of Rio Negro province.<sup>49</sup>

Water loss is exacerbated by water pollution. Industrial activities cause toxic discharges like metals, hydrocarbons, acids, and other chemicals. In Brazil, for example, illegal mining activities and the associated mercury pollution and deforestation have threatened access to safe drinking water for the indigenous Mundurucu people in the Tapajós River basin.<sup>50</sup> Again, water grabbing through pollution by industry is more dramatic in developing countries, where northern multinational companies can set up at a lower cost and with fewer regulations. For instance, the aquifer that supplies the population of Arlit, Niger, with drinking water has been contaminated by Orano’s (formerly Areva) mining activities for over 40 years with complete impunity. Not only has uranium mining, by pumping free water from the local aquifer, lowered the level of wells by several metres or even tens of metres, but it also poses a long-term threat to the potability of the water that supplies more than 100,000 people.<sup>51</sup> While 20%<sup>52</sup> of the uranium imported into France for the operation of nuclear power plants comes from Niger, the people of Niger benefit only from desertification and radiation that will remain for hundreds of thousands of years after the mines close.

In Bangladesh, one of the world's largest textile exporters, groundwater and surface water pollution levels are extremely high. Three of the capital Dhaka's rivers are now recognized by the Bangladeshi authorities as "biologically dead", and residents face high rates of skin and respiratory diseases.<sup>53</sup>

## **Bottled water companies**

**In fifty years, bottled water has become a major economic sector, one of the fastest growing in the world, with a 73% jump between 2010 and 2020.<sup>54</sup> It has also become a paradigm of water grabbing by private companies, which consider that water is a foodstuff like any other and should have a market value.**

It has been estimated that companies use two to three litres of water on average to produce one litre of their final product.<sup>55</sup> Yet the amount of groundwater withdrawn in certain regions frequently exceeds natural recharge rates and has significant local impacts, especially when companies operate in places where communities are already suffering from drinking water shortages.

At the heart of these phenomena are the processes of privatisation (transferring the control and ownership of resources to a for-profit actor) and commodification (incorporating a formerly public, common pool, or otherwise non-market resource into the market<sup>56</sup>). This hampers the access to water, in particular by increasing its price. Bottling companies manage to sell bottled water for 150 to 1,000 times higher than a litre of tap water.<sup>57</sup> They are banking on a loss of confidence in tap water, deepened by industrial pollution and exacerbated water scarcity, to open up new markets. A 2023 United Nations report found that several bottled water industry's marketing campaigns even aimed to discredit tap water and promote the concept of bottled water purity.<sup>58</sup> This privatises what was hitherto a public good and leads authorities to gradually give up on public infrastructures. That is why, according to the United Nations report, "It can be argued that the bottled water industry is not aligned strategically to provide universal access to drinking water". Moreover, this exploding market plays on unclear administrative boundaries and fraud. The United Nations report denounced the lack of transparency and regulation, especially in the Global South.

While the environment and the poorest people pay a high price for water privatisation, a few are the big winners. China's richest billionaire, Zhong Shanshan, built his Nongfu Spring empire by extracting water from some of the country's most ecologically important rivers and mountains.<sup>59</sup> The company ranks first in China's packaged drinking water industry, with a national market share of about 20% and phenomenal growth.<sup>60</sup>

Every minute, over 1,000,000 single-use plastic bottles are sold worldwide.<sup>61</sup> In 2021, the bottled water market was estimated at nearly \$270 billion. Sales are set to double by 2030.<sup>62</sup> In comparison, the annual financing required from 2015 to 2030 to achieve a universal drinking water supply (SDG 6.1) was initially estimated at \$114 billion.<sup>63</sup> In other words, ensuring universal access to drinking water would only cost about half of what the world is paying for bottled water annually.

## **Agricultural and agri-food sectors' role in direct and indirect water grabbing.**

Agriculture accounts for around 70% of the world's water consumption. It also is a main contributor to water diversion and pollution. Irrigation surfaces have increased by 60% since 1960 and many of the world's main agricultural areas are short of water, under pressure from the depletion of aquifers and droughts exacerbated by climate change and deforestation.<sup>64</sup> 57% of the total global blue water footprint (taken from lakes, groundwater storages, reservoirs) is unsustainable. This unsustainable footprint is dominated by only six crops, wheat, rice, cotton, sugar cane, fodder, and maize, and are located in only five countries.<sup>65, 66</sup>

However, water is often used to satisfy economic interests, particularly through the agrofuel industry and livestock farming. Amongst the three billion tons of cereals produced in 2019 worldwide,<sup>67</sup> 33% has been dedicated to animal feedstock and approximately 10% was used to produce agrofuels.<sup>68</sup> The agrofuels sector and industrial livestock farming both play a particularly prominent role in water grabbing.<sup>69</sup> On a global scale, industrial livestock farming is the main cause of deforestation.<sup>70</sup> The expansion of pasture land is responsible for 41% of tropical deforestation amounting to 2.1 million hectares, or half the size of the Netherlands.<sup>71</sup> This inevitably disrupts the water cycle. What's more, the feed used to feed livestock also uses water. Around half of the maize production is

grown for industrial livestock production worldwide.<sup>72</sup> Two-thirds of cereal crops in the European Union are used for animal feed.<sup>73</sup> It is estimated that it needs 15,000 litres of water to produce 1 kilo of beef meat.<sup>74</sup>

#### Meat consumption vs. GDP per capita, 2020

Average meat consumption per capita, measured in kilograms per year versus gross domestic product (GDP) per capita measured in constant international-\$. International-\$ corrects for price differences across countries. Figures do not include fish or seafood.

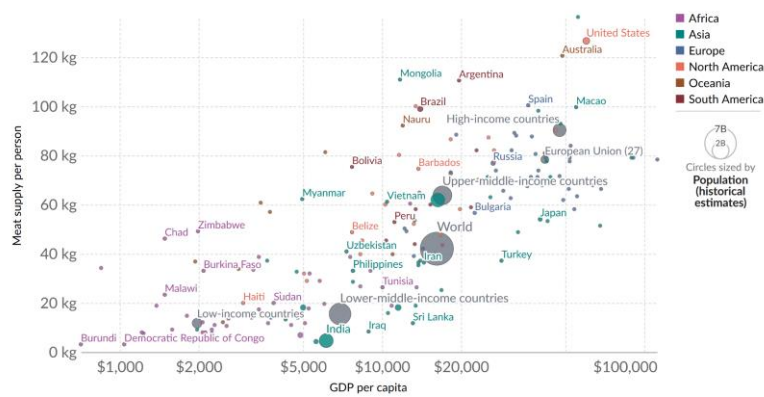


Fig. 4: Meat consumption vs. GDP per capita, 2020.

Source : FAO. Data compiled from multiple sources by World Bank.

Imported water-intensive agriculture products increase our water consumption. However, the water withdrawn is not necessarily used to produce a good that is consumed on the same territory. The market demand stimulates the offer and therefore is responsible for water-grabbing practices. The concepts of virtual water and water footprint help us measure this responsibility.<sup>75</sup>

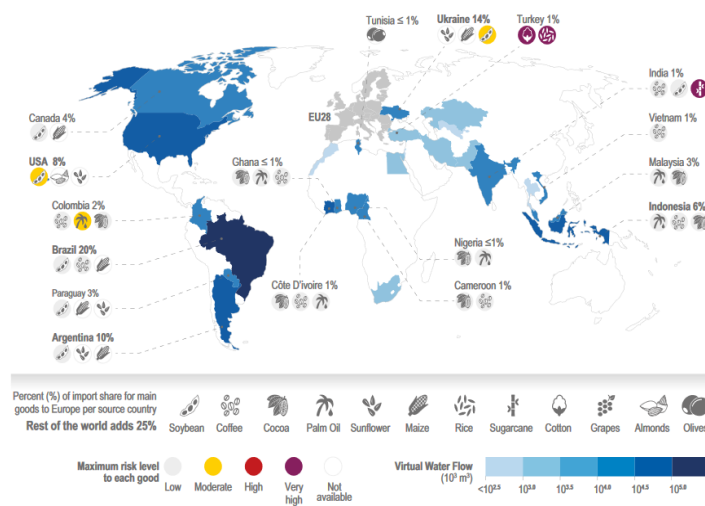


Fig. 5: Virtual water flows (of blue and green water) embodied in imports of agricultural products to the European Union.

Source : IPCC.

In Brazil, the soy industry accounts for 50% of global demand.<sup>76</sup> In the Cerrado and in the Amazon, soya cultivation has caused massive deforestation, leading to an increase in droughts,<sup>77</sup> but has also shifted massive water reserves to this exploitation, threatening primary ecosystems of these two ecological sensitive areas as well as the rights of the Indigenous peoples and local communities living there.<sup>78</sup> Consumption of food and other agricultural-based products in Europe thus has an impact on water grabbing in Brazil. In Latin America as a whole, taking only biodiesel, for each litre of random diesel<sup>79</sup> bought in France, 225 litres of water have been privatised.<sup>80</sup>



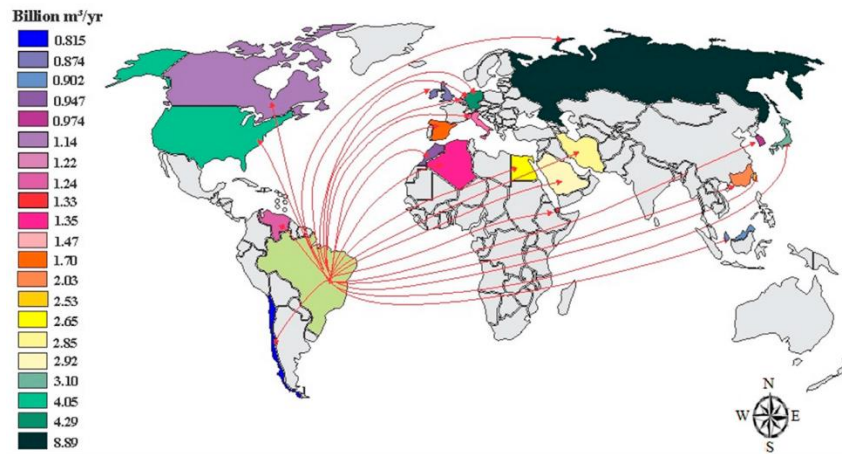


Fig. 6 : Gross virtual water export from Brazil related to agricultural commodities over the period 1997–2012.

Source : Da Silva and al. (2016).

During the 2000s, the desert region of Ica in Peru has seen an exponential growth in agribusiness and nontraditional exports (asparagus, grapes, paprika), creating severe groundwater scarcity and leading to a dramatic situation for urban populations and small farmers.<sup>81</sup>

## Lack of regulation and collaboration of public authorities

Access to water is a fundamental human right globally.<sup>82</sup> The recognition of this right creates obligations for governments, nonstate actors and international organisations to respect, protect and promote access to water for all people. However, these provisions fail to address the challenge of water grabbing in totality or offer adequate protection in practice. Furthermore, regulations are often not implemented or simply ignored due to the absence of robust enforcement mechanisms, leading to direct threats to the realisation of human rights.

### Absence, lack or failure of opposable regulation<sup>83</sup> to protect the water right

The water right is recognized in human rights law, at the global but also the regional and national levels<sup>84</sup> (e.g. Kenya<sup>85</sup>, South Africa<sup>86</sup> and Slovenia<sup>87</sup>). However, this is largely situated in terms of ensuring access to water for personal and domestic use, agriculture has largely fallen outside the scope of the human right to water and is usually referred to as “water rights”<sup>88,89</sup> More broadly, the framing of the right has been criticised as reducing water to an individual commodity instead of seeing it as a common good, ignoring collective rights and ways of accessing water and ignoring the criticality of water for other species and the environment while viewing it in largely anthropocentric terms.<sup>90</sup>

OECD made thorough guidelines on water providing policy guidance on a range of topics relevant to water resources management and the delivery of water services.<sup>91</sup>

At the UN level, negotiations have been engaged to elaborate an international treaty obliging multinational companies to comply with a Human rights and environmental due diligence process. This negotiation is still ongoing.<sup>92</sup>

Regional and opposable rules in the European Union include a series of regulations protecting access to water, water management and its quality.<sup>93</sup> There are also regional conventions protecting big European rivers. None of these instruments is preventing water-grabbing practices.

Similarly, in Brazil, Article 225 of the Constitution states that “everyone has the right to an ecologically balanced environment, as something common to the people. [...]”. However, the data and cases we enlightened through that report show with evidence that the legal system in Brazil, fails to protect the water resource from being grabbed and polluted.

In Africa, there are multiple political declarations<sup>94</sup> and instruments<sup>95,96</sup> at the continental<sup>97</sup> and national levels to implement a policy of water sustainability. Rarely are these tools opposable<sup>98</sup> before the projects move forward or

after they are conducted to the operational stage. Despite these multiple policies, public authorities often fail to enforce standards because of the lack of capacity or political will. The Oakland Institute reveals that *“Across the continent, governments, with support and guidance from international institutions such as the World Bank and Western aid agencies, are promoting large-scale agriculture schemes.”*<sup>99</sup>

There is no specific United Nations institution working on water.<sup>100</sup>

2023 saw the first water summit since 1977. The result of this conference, the Water Action Agenda,<sup>101</sup> did not intend to implement or recommend the prevention of water grabbing. The private sector engaged in a pledge to accelerate water access, without questioning their practices that undermine the capacities of populations to reach the right to access water. At the same time, less than 1/3 of the world's most influential food and agriculture companies are reducing their water consumption and pollution levels.<sup>102</sup>

Globally, no regulation prevents water-consuming products from being exported or imported regionally.

### **Industrial practices are under-regulated**

Furthermore, public authorities often fail to guarantee even this imperfect right to water security. This is the result of weaknesses in the judicial system, lack of regulation, no control or even support by the public authorities with the argument of economic growth.

In France, where Volvic water is extracted, public authorities declared two months of underwater extraction limitation in May 2023, because of the drought impacting the territory. Nevertheless, Danone continued to pump into the groundwater table with authorisation.<sup>103</sup> It was even revealed that Danone was pumping more water during the summer. Danone exports 70% of its bottle production.<sup>104</sup> Danone made huge profits in 2022: 959 million € profits and 1,261 million € dividends. The same year Danone withdrew 66,883,000 m<sup>3</sup>.<sup>105</sup>

In Mexico, Article 4 of the Mexican Constitution states that water and sanitation are inalienable human rights. However, the liberalisation of the water market since 1992 has accelerated the decline in per capita water availability. According to the Agua para todos social movement, in thirty years this legislation has led to the monopolisation and overexploitation of water by "large users" : 70% of the volume of water allocated under concession in Mexico is currently controlled by 2% of concession holders.<sup>106</sup>

Finally, in some contexts, public authorities are complicit in the act of water grabbing, directly or under the influence of an extractive elite. This can be referred to as “political capture”.<sup>107</sup> In Deux-Sèvres, France, 40 million euros of public money was spent on building 16 storage tanks to which only 5% of farmers will be connected for cereal and maize production.<sup>108</sup>

The Nile River illustrates the limits of excessive irrigation at the expense of water resources.<sup>109</sup> To address growing water stress, countries are striving to improve the efficiency of their irrigation systems. However, irrigation remains unaffordable for many small-scale farmers and largely benefits agro-industries, whose crops are grown for export rather than local food consumption.

Worldwide, it is estimated that in 2021, 520 billion US dollars of public subsidies delivered were considered environmentally harmful in agriculture, including irrigation systems that provoke aquifer depletion.<sup>110</sup>

Finally, World and regional trade agreements boost water-consumptive goods to be exported and imported, and participate in the stimulation of water-grabbing practices. The Mercosur agreement is putting farmers into competition and incentivizing extractive industries.<sup>111</sup>

The states may formally and financially support water-grabbing projects, or informally, through corrupt practices that affect multiple water sectors. The UN identifies many forms of corruption in the water sector that have a direct impact on the populations concerned.<sup>112</sup>

## **OXFAM'S RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Create a reflection framework toward a regulation decreasing water-intensive imported products in the northern countries.**

We need to begin the reflection about the creation of a new regulation tool at the EU level that would progressively reduce its water footprint. This would need to define what policy should be implemented, on which goods and on which timeline. The criteria for each identified threat, as well as the type of products concerned, need to be democratically discussed and Oxfam is open to contributing to that work.

### **Address States' historical responsibility: ensure ambitious funding for adaptation in developing countries and universal access to water.**

- Invest in water security and sustainable water management.
- Compensate those most affected by the climate crisis: Make sustained investments in water and sanitation systems and services.
- Ensure citizen representation and oversight in monitoring WASH services.

### **Transition from agro-industry to agro-ecology.**

Agroecology improves water infiltration into the soil, saving and conserving water. States must :

- Financially support agroecology through their international organisation representation or national subsidies.
- Stop financing agro-industry.
- Integrate specific objectives aimed at reducing poverty and gender inequalities, supporting family farming and improving the situation of rural areas.

To achieve this, the global northern markets must undertake a major reorientation of its agricultural financial support towards agroecology.<sup>113</sup> The counter-productive coexistence between agro-industries subsidies and agro-ecological policies is no longer acceptable.

## APPENDIX

### Appendix I : Methodological choices

This report aggregates research and media coverage from various sources. We present some examples (and not an exhaustive mapping) of water-grabbing situations that are either ongoing or have happened in the past but still have an impact on the environment or the population. We emphasise the water-grabbing mechanisms by companies in all the studied regions while showing the link between the climate-driven impacts on water and these companies.

Each mentioned company has been contacted to allow them to comment on the results of our study. The answers are published separately on our website.

To scope the report, we used a broad definition of water-grabbing. As there is no official definition of this term, we refer to situations of injustice where a small number of powerful actors take control of or reallocate or use water resources to their benefit at the expense of other users or the ecosystems.

We are aware that we may have used the words “hydric tension”, “water insecurity” and “water stress” indifferently although they are not the same words and do not have the same definitions. We assume the interchangeable employment of these terms for popularisation purposes.

The effect of renewable energy demand on water has voluntarily been excluded from this study, as well as the financialization of water considering the complexity of the topics. We are aware that hydroelectricity has a significant impact on the water cycle and availability of resources for human purposes but also on biodiversity. However, treating these issues requires another proper research about political choices and balances between other related impacts on natural resources and biodiversity. This analysis would not have been well treated in this paper because it focuses on the social and environmental impact compared to the profits that these companies are making. Financialization of water would also need a whole study to cover the impacts and the responsibility of companies and would have attracted the paper out of direct and physical water-grabbing practices.

We did not cover water and sanitation services as it is not a direct water-grabbing practice. One can refer to the report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation of the United Nations to cover this domain.<sup>114</sup>

Finally, this paper does not aim to provide a holistic critique of the involvement of the private sector in delivering water as a public service for the common good. It examines water grabbing by corporations in the water sector and points out some of the abuses of companies in some of the biggest sectors that consume water, block the right of populations to access safe water and which harm the environment.

### Appendix II : Definitions

**Water availability** can be defined as the quantity of water available on a given territory at a given time.

**Water scarcity** can be broadly described as a mismatch between the demand for fresh water and its availability, quantified in physical terms.

**Water security** is a broader concept, with definitions beyond physical water scarcity. The UN defines it as “the capacity of a population to safeguard sustainable access to adequate quantities of acceptable quality

water for sustaining livelihoods, human wellbeing, and socioeconomic development, for ensuring protection against water-borne pollution and water-related disasters, and for preserving ecosystems in a climate of peace and political stability".<sup>115</sup>

**Virtual water** : the water embedded in a product, that is, the water consumed during its process of production.

**Water footprint** : environmental indicator that measures the amount of freshwater used to produce each of the goods and services demanded by society.

### **Appendix III : Water grabbing and political capture**

The concept of *water grabbing* is intrinsically linked to that of *political capture*. Political capture refers to the exercise of undue influence over various administrations or state bodies by extractive elites, whose control or possession of a strategic power resource gives them the capacity to leverage resources in favour of their interests and agendas, which can lead to the "hijacking" of public policies and have a potential impact on democracy.<sup>116</sup>

For example in Peru, Maple Ethanol company requested 186 million cubic metres of water from the Chira Water Authority to irrigate 11,000 ha of sugarcane plantations to produce agrofuels. Chira Valley has a low average of annual rainfall (25mm). This request was first refused by the regional and national state authorities, including the autonomous authority of Chira Piura Hydrographic Basin and peasants associated with local water boards. However, the company allied with Piura's regional government and Peru's national government to pressure the authorities to comply with the request. Despite the consensus, the government issued a decree which accepted the request of the company.<sup>117</sup>

### **Appendix IV : The prominent role of agrofuels in water grabbing**

Agrofuels are presented as a solution to mitigate climate change. However, they require an enormous amount of land and water to be produced. Europe doesn't have enough arable land to produce its biofuel demand; it would require an area equivalent to that of Ireland to produce it.<sup>118</sup> One litre of biodiesel made from rapeseed (almost all the biodiesel produced in Europe) requires 14,000 litres of water.<sup>119</sup> If we multiply this by the number of litres of biodiesel produced in Europe each year (15 billion litres<sup>120</sup>), that's 214,616 billion litres used to produce biodiesel in Europe. In other words, It takes the equivalent of twice the size of the Dead Sea or 86 millions olympic swimming pool<sup>121</sup> to produce the biodiesel produced in Europe (i.e. 214 km<sup>3</sup> of water). These scarce resources are extracted from the global South to quench Europe's thirst for fuel.

### **Appendix V : The success of the agribusiness industry in the desert region of Ica, in Peru**

During the 2000s, the desert region of Ica in Peru has seen an exponential growth in agribusiness and nontraditional exports (asparagus, grapes, paprika), illustrating the overexploitation of aquifers to the demands of consumers in the global North. But this "miracle" led the agribusiness elite, through a range of strategies aimed at consolidating and expanding its power over state and nonstate actors, to overexploit scarce groundwater resources in the pursuit of economic growth without opposition.<sup>122</sup> According to G. H. Damonte, these strategies are based on three interrelated dimensions of power: economic capacity,

technical knowledge, and coercive capacity. By successfully positioning itself as the dominant political and economic actor in the region, this elite managed to secure access to groundwater, although on the verge of depletion. The top 0.1% of users now control a third of the total water, while small-scale farmers, 71% of the valley's users, have access to only 9%.<sup>123</sup> The aquifer levels have decreased alarmingly, on average some 0.8 metres per year, and are in danger of salinization because of overexploitation.<sup>124</sup> Pre-existing small and medium-scale farmers are feeling the brunt of the resource race. Most of them are pushed into debt and forced to sell land and wells to big agribusinesses because they cannot keep up with escalating costs.<sup>125</sup> Groundwater scarcity also represents a major problem for the urban population in the region. Already two wells serving 18,500 people in Ica have dried up, and at current rates of exploitation a third of the city's supplies, serving 185,000 people, are likely to dry in the next 25-30 years.<sup>126</sup> Furthermore, agricultural fertilisers and wastes have already caused a worrying groundwater pollution by nitrates. The exacting demands of consumers in the global North also means that the water used to irrigate Ica's soil can receive higher standards of treatment and be of better quality than the water used to keep Ica's human population alive.<sup>127</sup>

**Appendix VI : less than 1/3 of the world's most influential food and agriculture companies are reducing water consumption and pollution levels.**

New Oxfam analysis of World Benchmarking Alliance<sup>128</sup> data from 350 of the world's most influential food and agriculture companies, responsible for half of world's food and agriculture revenue, finds corporations are doing very little to conserve water:

- 28% of these companies report reducing water consumption in their operations.
- 11% are working with suppliers to reduce water withdrawal.
- 0.6% have set targets to reduce use in water-stressed areas and report against progress.

**While, industrial production causes widespread pollution harming local communities:**

- 23% of these 350 companies are reducing water pollution in their operations.
- 2% have a target to reduce pollution and report against progress.

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<sup>96</sup> African Development Bank Group. (2020). *Water Strategy 2021-2025*. [https://www.afdb.org/sites/default/files/documents/the\\_afdb\\_group\\_draft\\_water\\_strategy\\_2021\\_2025\\_-\\_towards\\_a\\_water\\_secure\\_africa\\_for\\_consultation\\_fr\\_1.pdf](https://www.afdb.org/sites/default/files/documents/the_afdb_group_draft_water_strategy_2021_2025_-_towards_a_water_secure_africa_for_consultation_fr_1.pdf)

<sup>97</sup> African Commission on Human and peoples' rights.(2019). *Guidelines on the Right to Water in Africa*. <https://achpr.au.int/fr/node/904>

<sup>98</sup> Opposability is the capacity of a rule, a legal act, a right, or a legal fact to produce international legal effects vis-à-vis a state, including a state or states unconcerned by the obligations that arise directly from it. Cf. Borge. (2021). Opposability and Non-Opposability in International Law, *British Yearbook of International Law*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bybil/brab006>

<sup>99</sup> Mousseau, Schmutzler & Currier. (2022). Drying out African lands: Expansion of Large-Scale Agriculture

*Threatens Access to Water in Africa*. The Oakland institute. P. 4. <https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/sites/oaklandinstitute.org/files/drying-out-african-lands.pdf>.

<sup>100</sup> UN-Water is a 'coordination mechanism'. It is composed of United Nations entities (Members) and international organisations (Partners) working on water and sanitation issues.

<sup>101</sup> United Nations. (2023). *Conference report: UN 2023 Water Conference*. <https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/27%20March%202022.pdf>

<sup>102</sup> See more in Appendix VI.

<sup>103</sup> The company signed a willing agreement to reduce its drilling rate by 10% but with no way of controlling it.

<sup>104</sup> Abdelilah & Schmidt. (2020). A Volvic, Danone puise et épuise l'eau. *Mediapart*. <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/250920/volvic-danone-puise-et-epuise-l-eau>

<sup>105</sup> An underestimated number, because water consumption declarations are incomplete. Danone declares industrial water withdrawals but not its massive water consumption through milk production (livestock, crops to feed animals, etc.) . Cf. Observatoire des Multinationales. (2019). "Matières premières : Comment les géants français épuisent la planète". <https://multinationales.org/fr/enquetes/cac40-le-veritable-bilan-annuel-2019/matieres-premieres-comment-les-geants-francais-epuisent-la-planete>

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<sup>106</sup> Latargère. (2023). Règles institutionnelles, gestion de la ressource en eau et injustices hydriques au Mexique. *Amérique latine*, 2, p. 197-224. <https://www.cairn.info/revue--2023-1-page-197.htm>.

<sup>107</sup> See more details in Appendix III.

<sup>108</sup> Zabalza. (2023). Dans les Deux-Sèvres, une manifestation anti-mégabassines sous haute tension. *Le Monde*. [https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2023/03/24/dans-les-deux-sevres-une-mobilisation-anti-megabassines-sous-haute-tension\\_6166763\\_3244.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2023/03/24/dans-les-deux-sevres-une-mobilisation-anti-megabassines-sous-haute-tension_6166763_3244.html)

<sup>109</sup> IPCC. (2023). *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. P. 626. [https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6/wg2/IPCC\\_AR6\\_WGII\\_FullReport.pdf](https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6/wg2/IPCC_AR6_WGII_FullReport.pdf)

<sup>110</sup> Earth track. (2022). *Protecting nature by reforming environmentally harmful subsidies: The role of business*. [https://www.earthtrack.net/sites/default/files/documents/EHS\\_Reform\\_Background\\_Report\\_fin.pdf](https://www.earthtrack.net/sites/default/files/documents/EHS_Reform_Background_Report_fin.pdf)

<sup>111</sup> Euractiv. (2021) 450 ONG appellent à un abandon de l'accord UE-Mercosur. <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/energie-climat/news/450-ong-appellent-a-un-abandon-de-laccord-ue-mercosur/>

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<sup>113</sup> Oxfam France, Action contre la faim, CCFD Terres Solidaires. (2021). *Une recette à la française : une pincée d'agroécologie pour une louche d'agro-industrie*. [https://www.oxfamfrance.org/app/uploads/2021/02/AGRO\\_Rapport\\_09022021.pdf](https://www.oxfamfrance.org/app/uploads/2021/02/AGRO_Rapport_09022021.pdf)

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<sup>116</sup> Oxfam México. (2019). *Captura política, grandes concentraciones y control de agua en México*. [https://oxfamMexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/INFORME\\_AGUA.pdf](https://oxfamMexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/INFORME_AGUA.pdf)

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