

March 20, 2008

Mr. Ban Ki-Moon
Secretary General,
United Nations Headquarters
S-3800
New York, NY 10017
USA

Dear Mr. Secretary General,

We, the undersigned civil society organizations, are deeply involved in struggles for water justice taking place around the world. We appreciate the public warnings you have made recently about the growing crisis of global water shortages and how they are fueling, along with climate change, many of the conflicts going on around the world today. However, we do not share your enthusiastic support for the CEO Water Mandate, nor do we believe that a voluntary corporate-driven initiative is a viable solution to the mounting worldwide water crisis.

Under the United Nations' Global Compact, the CEO Water Mandate is presented as a prime example of environmental stewardship. However, we are concerned that the real agenda of the CEO Water Mandate is to facilitate greater control over water sources and services by for-profit corporations. In our view, this is a prime example of 'green-washing' on the part of major companies and the United Nations should not be involved in legitimizing this process.

Furthermore, voluntary initiatives like those used by the UN Global Compact in its collaboration with corporations have been shown to be flawed. Not only are the principles narrowly conceived, but the companies typically fail to put them into practice and they are also allowed to 'opt in' or 'opt out' of the standards set.

Led by Coca Cola, which has a highly questionable track record when it comes to water takings and water pollution, the companies which have signed on to the CEO Water Mandate all have a vested interest in securing control over water sources and services in times of increasing water scarcity. Suez is the world's largest privatizer of water services and Nestle is the world's leading bottled water company. Pepsico and Groupe DANONE are also major players in the global bottled water industry. Other signers include food giants like Unilever, clothing manufacturers like Levi-Strauss, and chemical companies like Dow Chemical, all of whom are greatly dependent on water sources for the production of their products.

To make matters worse, we understand that these same corporations and their allies met on March 5th behind closed doors at the United Nations in New York to map out their plan of action for the CEO Water Mandate. Given the failure to safeguard against conflicts of interest and the lack of transparency of the process, we have no other recourse but to reject your appeal that civil society organizations join the CEO Water Mandate.

We maintain that water is the essence of life on this planet. As such, it is both a human right and an ecological trust. Local communities must be recognized as the true guardians of their local watersheds. Democratically elected governments must be responsible for ensuring community participation and control over water sources and services. The United Nations should be looking to local communities and representative governments, rather than for-profit corporations, to set the global policy agenda and lead the development of solutions to the world water crisis.

For these reasons, we urge you, Mr. General Secretary, to withdraw your support for the CEO Water Mandate because of its inherent conflicts of interest and lack of transparency.

Alternatively, we would be prepared to work with you in developing more transparent, accountable global institutions and mechanisms to ensure access to water for people and the environment.

For follow-up, please contact Tony Clarke, Polaris Institute, tclarke@polarisinstitute.org and Kathryn Mulvey, Corporate Accountability International, kmulvey@stopcorporateabuse.org.

Sincerely,

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