

Water privatization, Coca-Cola and the Olympics

2010 Olympics Should Stand for More

The Olympic ideal of friendly international competition between athletes who excel in their respective sports is a positive goal. The Council of Canadians understands and appreciates the pleasure and enjoyment so many around the world share in the spectacle and achievements of the Olympic Games. However, with less than half a year until the Games begin, we are gravely concerned by the increasing evidence that these worthy aspects are being overwhelmed, if not totally supplanted, by an “Olympic industry” focused on real estate development and massive corporate marketing opportunities. One that is founded and based in undemocratic and unaccountable national and international structures, and implicated in numerous corruption scandals that undermine everything a truly noble Olympic movement should stand for.

The February 2010 Olympic Games, which will be held in Vancouver and Whistler, B.C., will leave a negative legacy that is contrary to the goals set forward during the application and approval process to host the games. There is now no doubt that the Vancouver Organizing Committee (VANOC) and its affiliated partners will fail to meet their commitments with regard to the environment, social programs and fiscal accountability.

Coca-Cola: A Corporate Sponsor

Since 1928, the Olympics have provided Coca-Cola with a highly publicized forum to promote its products. With regards to its relationship with the Olympics, Coca-Cola claims to promote “the vision of a better and more-peaceful world, encourage the discovery of one’s abilities and promote the spirit of competition, the pursuit of excellence and a sense of fair play.”

“A better world?”

Only if a better world means drought and water contamination. According to the Indian corporate watchdog organization India Resource Centre, there is a pattern of water shortages in Indian communities where there are Coca-Cola bottling plants. The organization has documented unprecedented declines in groundwater in the Kara Dala area of Rajasthan after a Coca-Cola bottling plant began tapping into the aquifers. Groundwater levels dropped by a dramatic 19 feet over the course of a single year. This has had serious impacts on farming and access to drinking water in the area. Yet, with the support of the



Indian government, Coca-Cola draws water in this drought-prone region during the summer months when water shortages are most pronounced.

In addition, Coca-Cola operations have contributed to the contamination of drinking water sources around the world. In Paw Paw, Michigan, the beverage company sprayed waste water into the soil for 23 years. As a result, the groundwater in the area remains contaminated with heavy metals and carcinogenic

chemicals including arsenic and lead.

“The discovery of one’s abilities?”

Communities where Coca-Cola has set up operations have discovered an inability to protect their own water resources. Medha Patkar, a social activist leading the battle against Coca-Cola in Plachimada, India told the media: “The bottling of water that has really exploited our ground reserves [...] killed our aquifers, and [...] encroached upon the people’s rights to natural resources and the right to plan with those resources.” As a result, communities around the world have mobilized against the corporation to regain control of their water resources. In Plachimada, thousands took to the streets to demand the closure of the Coca-Cola plant in their community. The impact on their lives was so great that women of the community held vigil in front of the Coke plant steadily for four years.

“The spirit of competition?”

Coca-Cola and other beverage companies have cultivated a market for bottled water even in countries such as Canada, which has one of the best public drinking water systems in the world. They have persuaded people to pay 200 to 3,000 times what they pay for tap water by undermining public faith in municipal water systems. Even worse, Coca-Cola’s Dasani brand of bottled water is nothing more than municipal tap water paid for by the public purse, then repackaged and sold back to the public at an exorbitant price.

Coca-Cola has promoted its products among younger generations by taking advantage of cash-strapped schools in North America. They have enabled schools to generate revenues through exclusive vending contracts preventing them from selling any other competing product within their premises. There are even documented cases of vending machines being placed in front of water fountains in order to restrict access. Municipal governments in Canada are now fighting back

by banning the sale of bottled water in public spaces, improving access to public water through fountains and promoting tap water through public education programs. Between 2007 and 2009, more than 60 municipalities across Canada passed resolutions to restrict the sale of bottled water. That number is growing exponentially and many schools and other public institutions have also begun banning bottled water.

“A sense of fair play?”

At the 2002 Salt Lake Games, Coca-Cola declared that it was “going green.” The corporation promoted biodegradable cups and set up recycling stations for plastic bottles at the Olympics in an effort to brand itself as an environmentally friendly corporation. Never mind its contributions to the global water crisis by extracting unsustainable amounts of water from aquifers and denying communities of their right to conserve and protect water resources for basic needs. Never mind the fact that the vast majority of its packaging is not biodegradable or recycled, ending up in landfills and contributing to the tremendous waste management crisis of communities around the world.

There is no doubt that the Olympics and the ideals of peace, sports and goodwill that they stand for, is something Canadians support. But a time of economic crisis when federal, provincial and municipal governments should focus on public projects that create a lasting positive social and economic foundation, the 2010 Games appear set to leave a legacy of social and environmental devastation and massive debt that will hobble our ability to make positive change and respond to the serious challenges facing communities across the province and the country. Green washing is not fair play and the Olympics should not provide an opportunity for a company with a history of environmental abuse like Coca-Cola to promote itself as a friend of the environment.

The Olympics should stand for more.

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