

**TRADE UNION AFRICAN CONFERENCE
ON LABOUR AND THE ENVIRONMENT
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Working Group I

**EQUAL AND SUSTAINABLE ACCESS
TO RESSOURCES AND SERVICES
i.e. water, energy**

Access to resources stems from our concern about poverty alleviation and how to ensure that everyone attain a security of livelihood through equal access to food, energy, shelter, health & welfare, social security, water & sanitation, education and transport, i.e. those issues that incorporate the protection of basic human and economic freedoms and rights. Access policies should take into account the environmental sustainability and social equity of policy choices regarding the needs of future generations.

For Africa, the IFI's Structural Adjustment strategies have been promoting privatization, thereby restricting the ability of many communities to work towards equality in access to essential services, like water and energy. In addition, the irresponsible management of resources by both private and, sometimes, public authorities has put some African countries on track for environmental & public health disasters, resource shortages, not to mention job losses and social disruptions.

Access to water and energy in Africa

Water availability and supply in Africa: some basic facts

- An unequal distribution of the resource: Africa's share of global freshwater resources is about 9%. These freshwater resources are distributed unevenly across Africa, with western Africa and central Africa having significantly greater precipitation than northern Africa, the Horn of Africa and southern Africa.
Disparities in water availability: Because of the lack of rainfall in some countries, large numbers of people are dependent on groundwater as their primary source of freshwater.
- Water quality: Urban and rural areas face the challenge of the deterioration of water quality, due to non treated sewage water, excessive use of fertilizers and pesticides and industrial pollution, caused in particular by mining and energy production. In addition, legal and institutional frameworks seem out of date to deal with these issues.
- Water-related disasters: Both droughts and floods have increased in frequency and severity over the past 30 years. Over the past ten years, Africa has experienced nearly one-third of all water-related disaster events that have occurred worldwide, with nearly 135 million people affected, 80% by droughts. In 2000, large floods have hit southern Africa, leaving 850,000 people homeless, and almost 1,000 dead victims.
- Climate change and future water availability: According to the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the African continent is the most vulnerable to climate change. Runoff and water availability are expected to decline in the northern and southern regions of the continent; the frequency of floods and droughts will increase. As a result, 25 African countries are expected to experience water scarcity or water stress over the next 20–30 years, as shown in the map.
- Water supply coverage: With only 64% of the population having access to improved water supply, Africa has the lowest proportional coverage of any region of the world. The situation is much worse

in rural areas, where coverage is only 50% compared with 86% in urban areas. Yet more than half of the urban dwellers have inadequate provision if the definition is a house connection or yard tap.

Energy in Africa: some basic facts

- Availability of resources: Sub-Saharan Africa consumes 2.7% of world commercial energy. It has 2% of world proven oil reserves, 6% of world proven gas reserves and 6% of world proven coal reserves. There is a high level of solar insolation. There is a large hydropower potential, in excess of 1,100 TWh. Other energy resources include Uranium deposits
- The problem of accessibility: Two issues dominate the sub-continent as a whole: its over-dependence on low quality, traditional fuel, i.e. fuel-wood, and its over-reliance on imported commercial fuel, i.e. oil. These two issues of dependence crystallize around two issues of accessibility: the accessibility of the region to its own resources (oil, hydroelectric potential), and the accessibility of the populations within each country to quality fuels of any kind. Although the continent is rich in resources, the majority of the population does not have access to them: electricity consumption in industrialized countries is 150 times higher than in Africa - in Sahelian Africa the rural electrification level is less than 5%.
- Transfer of technologies: Ensuring proper development of African energy systems, especially with a view to their potential effects on the environment, depends on the culturally and economically appropriate application of scientific and technical innovation. For example, perhaps the single most powerful and accessible energy source in Sahelian Africa is solar insolation, but its exploitation has been retarded by the slow technological progress in the field. Exploitation of the enormous hydroelectric potential is constrained by the enormous capital requirements and environmental and social concerns generated by inappropriate dam-building throughout the developing world. In the meantime, oil imports in the majority of African countries are eating into foreign reserves, a problem exacerbated by the well-documented debt situation, while enormous quantities of oil, largely in the hands of foreign companies, are exported from a few countries. 76% of the continent's population still relies on wood for its basic fuel needs. This in turn contributes to the problem of desertification in Sahelian Africa, and has threatened to become a basic energy crisis.

Water and Energy Privatisation

“(…) Private-sector involvement in infrastructure was vigorously promoted by development agencies and international institutions in the 1990s and early 2000s. It was expected to inject both investment and efficiency into these sectors in developing countries, replacing traditional public-sector systems suffering from under-investment and inefficiency due to excessive political interference and rent-seeking behaviour by vested interests including bureaucracies and labour. It was assumed that this extension of private-sector involvement would be economically successful and generally welcomed, except among those interests losing out as a result of the reform process. In the water and energy sectors, these expectations have not been fulfilled. Private-sector investment in developing countries has been falling since its peak in the 1990s, multinational companies have failed to make sustainable returns on their investments, and the process of privatisation in these sectors has proved widely unpopular and encountered strong political opposition (...)”¹.

Key points for trade union action

¹ Public Resistance to privatization in water and energy. David Hall, Emanuele Lobina and Robin de la Motte. Development in Practice, Volume 15, Numbers 3 & 4, June 2005

- Trade Unions should support universal, egalitarian and sustainable and healthy access to fundamental resources.
- Access must be pursued with a policy mix including price equity, decent employment and fair distribution and availability of resources, with public and democratic control.
- Trade Unions have been very active in advocating against privatization. These advocacy efforts should be linked with some pressure towards a new, democratic and sustainable model for water and energy management.
- It is necessary to raise Trade Union rights for input on policy formulation in the areas of access to resources and services, as workers speak not only from the workplace, but also from the family, from the community.
- Training and education should be fostered as means of building a strategy for natural resources management. Unions should train agents on environmental health to disseminate the importance of the issue in the overall trade union policy.
- Trade Union capacity to enforce environmental law at the workplace should be reinforced.
- Cooperation with other civil society organizations could be an asset to better understand social and environmental effects of government proposals; and to have a complete evaluation of best options in the long run, and necessary policies to adapt in the short and medium run.
- Trade union regional and subregional exchanges could counter lack of domestic resources for research and analysis on these issues.