

**Selling survival shamelessly**

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*If all basic public services get privatised - essential public services that were once affordable and universally recognised as the state's duty to provide to all citizens - why should people be taxed to pay a redundant government for its keep? If a government cannot deliver in its most primary and vital duties, the way should be cleared for a government that can.*

Touched by the suffering of people across the country, women's organisations have constantly been emerging to come to the rescue. Such altruism can be a double-edged sword. Their help is absolutely necessary; at the same time it enables government to increasingly repudiate its duties. All too often such organisations become trapped in becoming a piece of plaster for the government: they want to work in neglected, niche areas, not replace government duties, yet they are unable to abandon those in any kind of need.

No outside institutions have been more responsible for the deterioration of the conditions of the masses, especially women, as World Bank and IMF through their manipulative, anti-poor policies. Government collusion may be also to blame but that hardly exonerates a self-styled economic and financial authority. The more they fail and destroy, the more raucous becomes their empty jargon and hypocritical piety.

Even if our governments have failed in their duties to their citizens, the principle remains that it is the state's duty to run certain basic public services that no individual can provide for himself, especially the majority of modest means. These include electric, gas and water supply, public sanitation, public transport, basic health care and hospitals, school education, roads, and so on. These are known as public goods and their provision by the state has been the acknowledged practice all over the world. The exception in the area of health is perhaps America, while Scandinavia leads the world in public services. In fact, half of the peoples earnings are deducted towards these, but the citizens would have it no other way, because the quality of service is comprehensive and superior, and cheaper through taxes than private services.

The cost of providing and maintaining public goods is shared by taxpayers. None of these are supposed to be privately owned, because private operators only work for profit and they would sell such services only to those who could afford the high price.

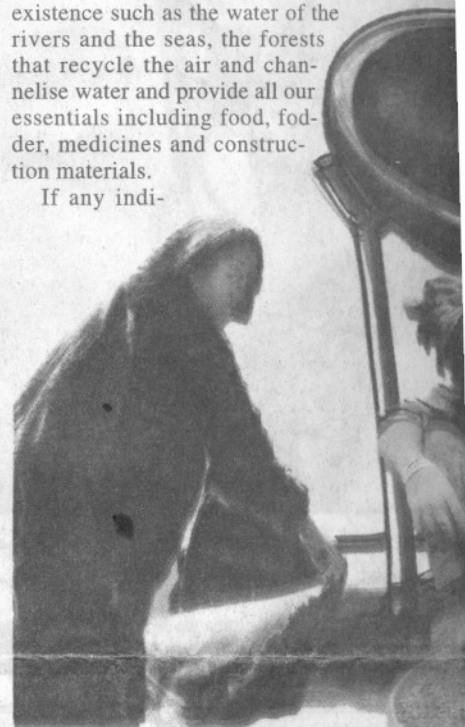
In recent years the cost of these services in Pakistan have been soaring and have hit the poor especially hard so that they have to make do with the least possible. Suddenly a few years ago, the poor were being asked to pay the costs of all medical care - x-rays, blood and other tests and all medicines. The only thing they were not charged for was the examining doctor taking a look at them. Being illiterate or uninformed - since the state does not even bother to tell people about what

concerns them most - the bewildered patients resigned themselves to praying they wouldn't die if the treatment was beyond their means.

Why had the government denied a basic right of people? The state had without consulting the public that pays for their keep, acceded to World Bank's demand for imposing 'user charges' on public services towards repaying ballooning loans -- which the people had never wanted or needed. While the government continues to run public health services, it seems about to change. Now the threat looms of having to pay even higher costs or go without healthcare at all.

But that's not all. Something even more basic than public goods is also being threatened -- known as the commons. The notion of the commons is really common sense and it arose independently in all parts of the world, and until recently it has never been disputed. There are certain things that are basic to survival, without which there can be no existence such as the water of the rivers and the seas, the forests that recycle the air and channelise water and provide all our essentials including food, fodder, medicines and construction materials.

If any indi-



vidual or group takes control over all these and denies people access to them, they would simply die. Therefore all these were considered to be under common ownership. And people shared the responsibility of looking after the commons. Even under monarchies, although the emperor owned all territory, the use of the commons was always considered to be the right of the people.

For rural people, the commons are partic-

ularly important because open pastures are necessary for livestock to graze around the year.

Pastures are a source of rich manure for farm fields or fuel. It is also essential for people, because open spaces and watching nature at work undisturbed, is the essential source of knowledge and creativity, provides inspiration, and is needed for recreation as well as spiritual health.

As bearers of children, and carers of families and nature, no one gets hurt more by the snatching away of the commons and public goods than women, especially when she is not a wage-earner.

ple as such, if people make intensified use of it causing changes in its configuration, people will have to manage that part of nature so that it does not get over-exploited or polluted or diseased and die out. This is the care that has been increasingly lacking under industrialisation and urbanisation. After the colonisers' left, whatever part of the commons the authorities chose was arbitrarily reserved for themselves or contracted out for commercialisation. Consequently poor people who depend mostly on the commons for their sustenance suffer terrible deprivation.

It is bad enough that World-Bank and IMF - US-dictated commercial banks that shamelessly pretend to be development banks - compel debt-ridden governments to exact indirect taxes from the poor as well, because of loans and further loans to pay off interest.

But the World Trade Organisation (WTO), born at the same time as World Bank and IMF in 1947 under a different name, and pushed into the wings by USA until the time was ripe to use it for American ends - is

that corporations are not hindered in any way while they exploit labour, resources and markets to the hilt to squeeze out the maximum profit.

How did this happen? By deceit, in which developing countries had no say. Historical evidence bears out how WTO was illegally created. But it is equally disgraceful that most developing country governments did not fight back, and compromised themselves instead.

About a year and a half ago, three confidential documents from the WTO Secretariat were leaked out in UK. They revealed the secret ties between big business and government. Whether influenced or bought over, the concerned persons had been corrupted enough to share confidential negotiation documents and inside information with corporation leaders. These revealed the negotiation positions of the European Union, the USA and the developing countries. The multinationals had been feverishly making plans for almost two years to bulldoze drastic pro-business changes in the WTO over public objections.

Prior information about the stand being taken by the various blocs enabled the multinationals to arm themselves with pseudo-legal arguments or arm-twisting tactics against resisting governments. Earlier when NGO activists had sought the same information, they were refused or told that no such papers existed.

The corporations were in fact gunning for foreign direct investment in services to the extent of forcing governments to allow privatisation of public services, even water-. Which is why Southern governments are busy selling or leasing off both the commons and public goods. Already a number of countries have been forced into this with disastrous consequences. And that is why, in spite of industrialisation and overproduction all over the world, there is more inequality and poverty than ever before, far greater than during colonization.

WTO alone is not responsible. World Bank and IMF have after all been paving the way for Northern, particularly US, capital, to take over the economies of the world, by encouraging and speeding the so-called developing world into unrepayable debt. Renato Ruggeiro, the former WTO Director-General had put it very bluntly: "we are writing the constitution of a single global economy." That was the objective of the colonisers all along. That is the objective of WTO and Northern corporate interests.

*Women, be warned. - These are serious violations of human, civil, cultural and religious rights.*



Most governments of agricultural developing countries have neglected the development of rural areas so that the commons is the only source of sustenance for the rural poor. The callousness falls on women as well although agricultural output would not be the same since women do anywhere between 60 to 80 per cent of agricultural work, largely as unpaid labour.

Although nature needs no help from people

even worse. The astonishing part about the WTO is that, unlike the World Bank and IMF which are technically owned by governments, WTO is a creation of major US multinational corporations with the objective of a world that is run purely by private enterprise - essentially giant ones; where there are no welfare states or services, and the governments cannot tell them what they can or cannot do-. Governments are only supposed to ensure