**Water stress**

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In May 2023, the Arizona Department of Water Resources imposed restrictions on the construction of new housing in the Phoenix area, citing a lack of groundwater. The decision aims to slow population growth in one of the fastest-growing regions in the U.S. and underlines the dwindling water resources in the drought-stricken southwest.

As water levels in the Colorado River have declined, the states dependent on it (Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and Wyoming) are increasingly at odds over how to distribute the declining supply.

The U.S. is not alone in contentious domestic debate over water supplies. Australian states have constantly quarreled over water rights across the Murray-Darling Basin. Disruptions to water supply or perceived misuse can cause immediate social unrest, and countries like Iran and France have seen violent protests regarding water recently.

Constant and affordable access to fresh water is recognized as a basic human right by the UN. And in addition to providing a foundation for life, fresh water is also crucial for industry and manufacturing, energy production, agriculture, sanitation, and other essential societal functions.

But around the world, its availability is threatened. Desertification, climate change, man-made water diversion, dam building, pollution, and overuse have seen rivers, lakes, and aquifers dry up. Since 2000, the world has added almost 2 billion people, putting further strain on global water infrastructure and supplies.

Poor water management and infrastructure also play a major role in water scarcity around the world. In Iraq, up to 14.5 percent of the country’s water is lost to evaporation and two-thirds of its treated water is lost due to leaks and poor infrastructure. Up to 25 to 30 percent of South Africa’s water is lost to leaks, while even in many industrialized countries, up to 15 to 20 percent of water supply is lost.

Inequality can also exacerbate water stress. Amid Cape Town’s water shortages in recent years, 14 percent of the population has been found to be responsible for more than half of the freshwater use in the city. Across Africa, one in three people already faces water scarcity, where “the availability of natural hygienic water falls below 1,000 m3 per person per year.”

On top of government control of water supply and infrastructure, multinational companies like Nestlé S.A., PepsiCo, Inc., the Coca-Cola Company, and the Wonderful Company LLC play a huge role in the global water industry. In 2013, former Nestlé CEO Peter Brabeck-Letmathe was forced to backtrack after a 2005 interview resurfaced where he stated it was “extreme” that water was considered a human right.

However, water privatization has increased significantly over the last few decades. In 2020, Wall Street allowed water to begin trading as a commodity, and today, “farmers, hedge funds and municipalities alike are now able to hedge against – or bet on – future water availability in California.” Monetization has even seen countries like Fiji, the world’s 4th-largest water exporter in 2021, face water supply shortages over the last few years.

Excerpted: ‘Where Are the World’s Water Stresses?’. Courtesy: Counterpunch.org