



Philantrocapi-talism and the re-making of global water charity

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, philantrocapi-talism has surfaced as one of the liveliest expressions of neoliberalism. The current global concern and anxiety over an unfolding socioecological catastrophe provides fertile ground for the emergence of self-proclaimed capitalist saviours and of new forms of aid governance. Water has not been exempted from this trend. Using assemblage thinking, the paper takes as case studies three water charities involved in the global quest to solve the water crisis to illustrate how they deterritorialise – differently but in an interconnected way – water into a commodity. We show how these charities contribute to reterritorialize water on commercial and financial circuits, thus leading – to varying extents – to the insulation of water from public debate and foreclosing the opportunity for an active public engagement of the civil society. The paper thereby also serves to demonstrate how charities both reproduce and are produced by the neoliberalisation of the water crisis.

“I believe in the supreme worth of the individual and in his right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I believe that every right implies a responsibility; every opportunity, an obligation; every possession, a duty.”

John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 1941

1. Introduction

Philantrocapi-talism – a term that denotes the need for philanthropy to become efficient, profitable, market-driven and investment-based – has emerged as one of the latest, and arguably liveliest, expressions of neoliberalism and cultural capitalism. The number of super rich people – those worth over USD 30 m – has grown steadily during the last decade, even during the COVID-19 pandemic (Knight Frank, 2021). The world’s 2,153 billionaires – most of whom live in North America and Europe – have more wealth than the 4.6 billion people who make up 60 percent of the planet’s population (Oxfam, 2020). At the same time, and possibly because of this, philanthropy is thriving, and giving away money, as the Economist puts it, has become fashionable among the rich and famous (Economist, 2006). Important work from McGoey (2012; 2015) exposed some of the contradictions of this new golden age of philanthropy, illustrating how large charitable organisations are essentially replacing

governments as the providers of social welfare, reproducing the same inequalities and injustices that they are trying to address. Grounded on the assumption that it is the market that sets the rules of the game, the *ethos* of philantrocapi-talism is that one must make money whilst saving the world. These new ways of being charitable have been largely assimilated by non-profit organisations and are now enmeshed into the broader logics that inform the third sector (Budabin and Richey, 2021).

Fitting well with the (white) saviour trope (Abidin et al., 2020), philantrocapi-talists increasingly influence the aid agenda and at the same time are not accountable to voters or shareholders nor can be caught in the nets of state bureaucracy. They can thus think ‘big’, quickly, ‘revolutionarily’ and, most importantly, in intellectual isolation. However, these ventures raise questions and require critical scrutiny (Fuentenebro and Acuto, 2021). Callahan (2018: 7), who looked at private philanthropic foundations, argued that compared to the twentieth century, “[p]hilanthropy is becoming a much stronger power centre and, in some areas, is set to surpass government in its ability to shape society’s agenda”. Critical geographers and development scholars have indeed examined the increasing – and unregulated – influence that these new ‘global governors’ (Clarke, 2019) have on international development. Every-one can have an informed opinion, but if you are ‘a rich guy with an opinion’, as Bill Gates (2021: 8) referred to himself,

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then your opinion is likely to receive considerable attention. Gates, who in his recent book *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster* explained: “I own big houses and fly in private planes — in fact, I took one to Paris for the climate conference — so who am I to lecture anyone on the environment?”, is a telling example of the dialectics of philanthrocapitalism.

Building on this line of inquiry, Wilson (2014: 1144) conceptualises philanthrocapitalism as an ideology that “mobilises a disavowed enjoyment of global inequality”. At the same time, philanthrocapitalism reduces transparency and participation, thus enforcing the rule of business onto the public domain, as in the case of agricultural policies in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Thompson, 2018; Shaw and Wilson, 2020). Webber et al. (2021) focused on global foundations and their urban resilience projects to uncover the unequal power relations through which Northern institutions define and impose their policies on the Global South. And indeed, as Koot and Fletcher (2020: 288) outlined, even when philanthrocapitalism superficially seems to steer towards a genuine involvement of disempowered communities – what they call ‘popular philanthrocapitalism’ – such initiatives “allow for neoliberal capitalism to further extend its reach under the pretence of empowering those whom it marginalizes”. Global water governance has not been exempted by this trend. In recent years, a new and heterogeneous range of actors has been attempting to solve the so-called ‘global water crisis’ through philanthropic initiatives. Global water charities, in particular, have emerged as influential Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), foregrounding a neoliberal vision of charity and philanthropy and supporting market-based solutions to improve access to water. These organization can be led by philanthrocapitalists directly, but they can also be founded and governed by common people inspired by the philanthrocapitalist logic. Also, and similarly to Clarke’s (2019) idea of the global governors or Goodman and Barnes’s (2011) study of development celebrities, global water charities are often fronted by powerful individuals and celebrities, that with their charismatic influence raise popular support for and lend credibility to the acritical beliefs in the healing capacities of progress and (micro)technical solutions. Despite the increased presence of global water charities, research on these organizations remains limited.

Hence, this article serves two principal purposes. The first, and more general, is to reflect on how the growing influence of philanthrocapitalism is changing the landscape of global water governance. The second, and more specific purpose, is to provide the first account of how global water charities reproduce, and are produced by, the ideas and processes that have more generally determined the neoliberalisation of the water crisis, something that ends up hindering the scope of their activities. Theoretically, we explain this dynamic by drawing together assemblage thinking with debates about the privatization and commodification of water resources. In our use of assemblage thinking, the explanatory potential of the concept of lines of flight is fundamental to our analysis of how capitalism systematically interrupts and absorbs the transformative potentials of NGOs/charities to ensure its same survival. Assemblages are composed of rhizomes, and rhizomes are composed of lines. The lines that escape the boundaries of one assemblage, and allow it to connect up with another assemblage, are called lines of flight. Focusing analytical attention upon the concept of becoming and the notion of lines of flight furthers our understanding of the continuous re-making of these charities, which is the litmus test of contemporary global water governance. Empirically, we develop these arguments by focusing on three global water charities, WaterAid, Water.org and Safe Water Network (SWN), and situating them within the recent history of global water governance. Through this, we contribute to and expand upon existing scholarship on critical water geography (Bakker, 2007; 2011; Harris, 2009; Ioris, 2012; Budds, 2013; Loftus and Budds, 2016; Bunds, 2017; Menga and Swyngedouw, 2018; Williams and Swyngedouw, 2018; Rusca et al., 2019; Furlong, 2020; Han and Webber, 2020; Schmidt, 2021; Menga and Goodman, 2022), and critical development studies (Clark, 1995; Baer, 2014; Mitlin, et al., 2007; Goodman and Barnes, 2011; Banks and Brockington, 2020; Budabin and

Richey, 2021). More specifically, we show how global water charities rely on market mechanisms to transform water from a commons into a commodity, reterritorialising this resource into commercial and financial circuits, and thus normalising the assumption that water challenges have to be solved through market-based and market-focused solutions.

The article continues as follows. In the next section, we trace the theoretical and conceptual contours of our argument, explaining how assemblage theory and the notions of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation can help us think about the neoliberalisation of water. We then contextualise the rise of water charities situating the paper at the intersection of geography and development scholarship on global water governance and the commodification of water. Building on this, the fourth section discusses our case studies, illustrating how global water charities deterritorialise – differently but in an interconnected way – water into a commodity, reterritorialising it on commercial and (micro) financial circuits. The final section discusses how the findings of this paper can be applied to future research in the field of global water governance and development studies.

2. On rhizomes and capitalist territories

Central to our argument is the application of assemblage thinking for understanding philanthrocapitalism in the water sector. While providing a full overview of assemblage thinking is beyond the scope of this study (for a comprehensive review of how assemblage thinking has been applied to geography and related fields refer to Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; Müller and Schurr, 2016; Ash, 2020), we shall nevertheless clarify the meaning of the key Deleuzoguattarian notions of assemblage, line of flight and de/re/territorialisation, as these will underpin our discussion in the next sections.

Assemblage thinking refuses traditional hierarchical relations between entities, and refocuses analytical attention upon the concept of becoming and a relational ontology, which is crucial to explain relationships between material and nonmaterial beings. Following Deleuze, assemblages can be defined as a:

multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them across ages, sexes and reigns – different natures. [...] It is never filiations which are important but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind. (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987: 69)

An assemblage is thus a horizontal, rhizomatic union, and one of its defining aspects, as Delanda (2016) notes, is that it is constantly evolving through temporary relations of exteriority which characterise the process of becoming (different). These relations are formed, or develop, through both a virtual and an actual plane. The two planes are interconnected and yet also mutually exclusive, and both characterise the real. The virtual is not the possible that awaits to be realised, but it is rather an incorporeal real that awaits to become actual. The interrelation between the virtual and the real unfolds in lines of flight. An assemblage is indeed constituted by a collection of lines: “[l]ine of molar or rigid segmentarity, line of molecular or supple segmentation, line of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 204). As Thornton (2020: 436) explains, lines of flight are “lines that reach outside of the assemblage, those parts of the assemblage that escape the structure of which they are a part, and which serve to connect such an assemblage to that which is outside itself.” Thus, a line that escapes the boundaries of one assemblage allows it to connect with another one. In an assemblage, lines of flight are thus relations that allow it to make machinic connections with other assemblages in its environment, they are, as Legg (2009) observed, its driving mechanism. As an example, Deleuze and Guattari (2004; 2012) look at the reciprocal relation between certain species of wasps and orchids, whereby the orchid reproduces the image of the wasp to sexually attract it and thus allow its own pollination. Lines of flight are crucial in the relations of exteriority between the two assemblages. The

wasp becomes the orchid, and the orchid becomes the wasp, their desire-driven encounter producing new forms of being in a mutual process of becoming. As Deleuze and Guattari explain (2004: 10):

The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp deterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen. Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome.

Beyond their importance in the formation of an assemblage, lines of flight have a significant explanatory potential, as they help us understand how an assemblage can be deterritorialized. Indeed, we should note in the above quote the use of the terms deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, that mark the machinic transformation of an assemblage. Deterritorialisation is the movement by which something escapes or departs from a given territory. Absolute deterritorialising movements are virtual and lead to relative deterritorialising movements that are actual (Parr, 2010). If the lines of flight that produced the territorialisation are not blocked and prevail over secondary reterritorialisations, we then have a positive deterritorialisation and the creation of a new assemblage. In this case, positive does not denote a value, but it rather indicates a real transformation, the creation of a new assemblage – and with it, of a new earth and new people – that connects, rather than conjugates, previously disconnected entities. Importantly, every assemblage consists of two sides, one relating to its content, and the other to its expression. The former consists of “a machinic assemblage of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another”, the latter “is a collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 88).

According to Deleuze and Guattari (2004), feudalism was overcome only when the ‘flow of merchant capital’ (an example of a line of flight that leads to a positive absolute deterritorialisation) escaped the feudalist assemblage and connected various feudal regimes to one another, thus destabilising the despotic feudal machine and leading to the birth of capitalism. As in the case of the orchid and the wasp, a transformation happens only when a connection with the outside is established. But things are different with capitalism. As Thornton (2020) illustrates, capitalism needs to continuously deterritorialise and reterritorialise itself in order to ensure its survival and satisfy its need for constant growth. To do this, capitalism uses lines of flight to create new relations of exteriority, but then recaptures them, thus allowing only ‘negative deterritorialisations’ (i.e. deterritorialisations that rather than being truly revolutionary are only temporary) that do not challenge its own existence. As such, capitalism thrives on its contradictory relationship with lines of flight. A capitalist assemblage, as Nail (2017: 32) points out, reinterprets and decodes “qualitative relationships through the privatization of all aspects of social life, free trade, advertising, freeing of labor and capital, and imperialism”.

The analytics of lines of flight is particularly helpful to understand the relationship between charities and capitalism. Charity, when taken seriously with meaningful sacrifices and donations, threatens the logic of growth and accumulation that underpins the same existence of capitalism (Menga and Goodman, 2022). As such, capitalism treats charity, in its essence, as a negative line of flight that must be cut off from the rhizome. And yet, before doing this, capitalism absorbs this potentially revolutionary line of flight, and reterritorialises a market on it, as evidenced by the rise of philanthrocapitalism. Caught into this system, water charities become entrenched in the market logics and mechanisms of care driven by the imperatives of growth and competition. The disinterested act of giving has thus been neutralised, it has become a business that helps keep the system in place. To further exemplify this, one can look at Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): large multinational companies have embraced the principles of CSR to tokenistically respond to social and ecological criticisms and ultimately expand their businesses towards green capitalism (Chiapello, 2013). In our case, as

we will argue in the next sections, the relationship between capitalism and charity has contributed to transform the very nature of giving in the water sector.

Assemblage thinking thus offers a relevant analytic for understanding the neoliberalisation of (water) charity and the potentially transformative force of difference, epitomised, in this case, by the seemingly incompatible relationship between solving the water crisis and making money in the process. The above discussion raises a few important questions with regard to our aim in this paper. For instance, what are the ‘bodies’ and what are the ‘enunciations’ forming the global water charities assemblage? And what are the relations, ideas and materialities actualised by the struggle to solve the water crisis, and therefore, by the productive force of this specific desire?

To further develop this reflection, we now turn to discuss the evolution of global water governance since the 1970 s. We then outline the emergence of global water charities and illustrate how our three case studies exemplify the ways in which capitalism has transformed water into a commodity, using the lines of flight of charity to operate beyond governments and their civil societies.

3. The evolution of global water governance: commons and commodities

Urban political ecology (UPE) has long critiqued the neoliberalisation of the water crisis and processes of commodification of water that shape water flows, infrastructural configurations and, ultimately, work to marginalize poor urban dwellers globally (Bakker, 2003, 2011; Heynen et al., 2006; Loftus et al., 2019; Loftus and McDonald, 2001; Meehan et al., 2020; Ranganathan and Balazs, 2015; Rusca et al., 2017; Swyngedouw, 1997, 2004). Although this work is largely informed by a Marxist framework (over)emphasising structural processes and ideas around the production of nature (see Heynen, 2014 for a critique of the first wave of UPE), it is relevant to our assemblage-informed analysis. First, it serves to place the emergence of philanthrocapitalism in the context of wider governance shift occurred in the water sector over the past decades. Second, this literature articulates the relationship between the commodification of water and the emergence of INGOs/NGOs as global water governance actors, placing particular attention to their role in reproducing or transforming development pathways informed by capitalist logics. In this section we discuss these two aspects, which are central to our empirical analyses.

3.1. The commodification of water

Urban water services do not have a history of communal institutions in the sense of a governance beyond the market and beyond the state, based on “self-determination of commoners”, reciprocity and collective decision making (Bakker, 2007; Bollier and Helfrich, 2014; Federici, 2018; Linebaugh, 2009: 396). However, the concept of universal access grounded on the ‘membership’ to humanity has been extended to ‘social commons’ like water services (Barlow, 2012). Based on this logic, water services were owned and controlled by the state and managed as a collective consumption good, regulated and provided by a public body (Swyngedouw, 2005a).

The commons, however, pose a profound challenge to capitalist logics as they are grounded on communal relations and properties that capitalism needs to eradicate to grow and proliferate (Bollier and Helfrich, 2014; Federici, 2018; Jeffrey et al., 2012). The 70s mark a departure from the notion of water as a collective consumption good and the emergence of new water governance logics, which privilege efficiency over universal access, and consumers over citizens. The emerging discourse of ‘state failure’ portrayed states as inefficient and unable “to treat water as a scarce commodity” (Winpenny, 2005: 1). Valuing water as an economic good, it is argued, will ensure efficient management and conservation of the resource. The Dublin Principles (1992) contributed to this shift by framing water scarcity as both a natural phenomenon to

be addressed through full-cost recovery tariffs, and social condition generated by state failures (Bakker, 2003; Woodhouse and Muller, 2017).

In line with this new vision and economic logic, the late 80s and 90s were characterised by a progressive ‘hollowing out’ of the state and what Swyngedouw (2005b: 1992) described “governance beyond-the-state”, encompassing private economic actors and civil society taking greater roles in managing basic services previously provided by the state. Concurrently, principles of economic equity have replaced social equity (respectively willingness-to-pay and ability-to-pay’ principles) in water pricing, and a new “hydrosocial contract” has emerged that involves consumers (rather than citizens) and is grounded on the elimination of subsidies and the conception of water as a “quasicommodity” (Bakker, 2005: 458; Rusca and Schwartz, 2018). This shift is described by Swyngedouw (2005a) as the “privatization of the commons”, whereby local commons are dispossessed, turned into global capital and transferred to global markets.

These reforms had profound implications on urban water supply in the global South. A wealth of literature has critiqued the commodification of urban water in postcolonial cities, raising concerns of water (in)justice, distribution and equity, conditions of access to water services political participation and cultural recognition of different claims on water (Bakker, 2005; Harvey, 2003; Linton, 2019; Swyngedouw, 2005a; Zwartveen et al., 2017). As several scholars have noted, the orthodoxy of full cost recovery and other neoliberal reforms in cities where the colonial heritage of dispossession and marginalization is reflected in stark inequalities and heterogenous infrastructural configurations, inescapably exacerbates inequalities (Bakker, 2003; Bartels et al., 2018; Castro, 2007b; Graham and McFarlane, 2014; Kooy and Bakker, 2008; Lawhon et al., 2018; Loftus and McDonald, 2001; Rusca and Schwartz, 2018). Today, in most cities water utilities only supply between 40 % and 70 % of urban population, whilst the rest – often the most vulnerable and low-income dwellers residing in informal settlement – must rely on self-supply, or on an array of small-scale water providers operating as social enterprises, for profit or for philanthropic reasons (Ahlers et al., 2014; Marston, 2014; WHO/UNICEF, 2019).

3.2. NGOs: (re)producing or transforming development trajectories?

NGOs have often been portrayed as a force of transformative or “alternative” development, promoting people-centred and participatory approaches, grassroot-driven development, innovation in and commitment to basic service delivery to the most vulnerable (Clark, 1995; Lewis et al., 2020; Sansom, 2006). However, the emergence and proliferation of international NGOs must be understood in relation to their position to donors and wider shifts in the global water governance agenda. In this light, NGOs’ dependence on large and powerful international donors raises questions on their ability to promote alternative forms of development (Banks and Hulme, 2012; Mitlin et al., 2007; Rusca and Schwartz, 2012). As NGOs increasingly prioritise donors over the demands and needs of the beneficiary community, the development models they promote become more mainstream and, thus, increasingly less alternative. On paper, NGOs and promoters of neoliberal logics are guided by opposed and competing ideological perspectives. The first, stemming from the socio-democratic traditions, is concerned with empowering citizens and deepening democracy, and sees inclusive governance as a way to promote more equitable development (Castro, 2007a). The second, as seen before, is grounded on commodification of nature, full-cost recovery of water services and de-regulating private actors (Bakker, 2005; Castro, 2007a). However, in recent years the distance between these perspectives seems to have shrunk. As further discussed in the next sections, although these ideological perspectives are, in principle, opposed, the neoliberal and the empowerment agendas have – more or less explicitly – converged in promoting market based governance (Rusca and Schwartz, 2012).

In parallel with this shift, over the past decades NGOs have grown in

number, size and economic turnover. Only in the UK, between 2009 and 2015 the number of charitable organizations grew by 30 % and their expenditure by 45 % (Banks and Brockington, 2020). In the first half of 2020 a total of GBP 5.4 billion were donated to charities in the UK (Charities Aid Foundation, 2021), whilst in the U.S. charities were awarded USD 471.44 billion in 2020 (Giving USA, 2021). Although data in relation to the water charities are limited, searching for ‘water’ on Charity Navigator – a website that evaluates charitable organizations based in the United States – yields nearly 8000 results. A similar search on Charities Aid Foundation – a charity whose aim is to bring together companies, private philanthropists, other charities, governments, and not-for-profit enterprises – results in more than 1400 resources. Furthermore, there are many NGOs that operate in the water sector even though they are not formally listed as ‘water charities’, and they receive a considerable amount of international funding. For instance, the volume of OECD - Development Assistance Committee funding channelled through NGOs in the water supply and sanitation sector increased from 308 USD millions in 2010 to 338 USD million in 2016 (OECD-DAC, 2019).

In this paper we focus on what we term global water charities, which operate at multiple scales, typically have their headquarters in the USA and Europe, and raise funds globally to finance and implement projects aimed at supplying water to underserved communities in urban and rural areas in the Global South. These global charities operate in different ways, ranging from funding and developing infrastructural projects (i.e., a standpipe connected to a mechanized borehole) to operating small-scale decentralized water supply systems and undertaking capacity building and educational initiatives. Through this, we contribute to a growing literature scrutinizing the influence of international NGOs and/or global water charities in water governance (Rusca and Schwartz, 2012; Rusca et al., 2015). By placing work on the commodification of water into conversation with assemblage thinking, we show how global water charities play a significant role in sustaining the neoliberalisation of the water crisis. First, focusing the attention on lines of flight we provide insights into territorialising and deterritorialising movements, which have been little explored in geographical scholarship, and thus contribute to explain the relationship between capitalism and the evolution of the role, nature, and scale of water charities. Second, in doing so we shed light on new frontiers of neoliberalisation of nature, epitomised by philanthrocapitalism.

4. Overview of the case studies

Our empirical analysis aims at exploring the role of global NGOs in an era of increasing commodification of water resources and services. We focus on three charities - [Water.org](#), WaterAid and SWN - that operate in the water sector at global and local scales. Their funders and members are routinely invited participants to international water and economic fora such as the World Water Forum, the Stockholm Water Week and the World Economic Forum. They are involved in national and regional expert panels and working groups to advise policy making and they are involved in community level initiatives including the actual implementation and management of water-related projects. A common characteristic of the three charities is that they are also financed by private organizations and well-known philanthropists and they receive public fundings through international donor organizations. However, as we will show below, they are characterised by different governance structures, visions and institutional arrangements. While they are exemplary of the increased neoliberalisation of water governance, each of these charities reflects a particular trajectory. Neoliberal logics were not at the forefront of WaterAid’s activities when it was funded in the 1980s but became more present over time also due to increased pressure to comply with donors’ expectations. Similarly, [Water.org](#) from a seemingly disinterested initiative is now fully entrenched with market logics. Meanwhile SWN aligned with and promoted market-based approaches since its very inception.

In examining these charities, we pay particular attention to the enunciation and the bodies forming the two sides of the respective assemblages. The former refers to the missions and visions of the charities, their perception of the value of water and their allegiance to the market. The latter refers to the people, practices and materials – including wells, pumps, pipes, managers, founders and project leaders – united by these water charities in their activities. The analysis presented below combines fieldwork on some of the projects implemented by WaterAid in Maputo, Mozambique and Lilongwe, Malawi (Rusca and Schwartz, 2012; Rusca et al., 2015), and by SWN in Accra, Ghana (Alba, 2021), with a systematic and rigorous review of these water charities webpages and social media channels, which are crucial for apprehending these charities' visions, fundraising campaigns, and development logics. As Hart (2006) illustrated, the Internet offers non-profit organisations a unique opportunity to build and enhance relationships with their donors and volunteers. The fieldwork on WaterAid' projects was undertaken in multiple intervals between 2009 and 2015, when the global charity was implementing a large project to improve water service delivery to low-income areas. Data were collected through over 60 interviews with water utility managers and field engineers, NGO staff, community-based organisations and kiosk attendants. In Ghana, research on SWN was conducted as part of a wider study on the practices of water governance involving participatory observations and over 40 interviews with government functionaries, water utility managers, traditional authorities, staff of donor's agencies and development cooperation, including one staff of SWN (Alba, 2021). Previous research on Water.org (Menga and Goodman, 2022), was based on a systematic and rigorous review of the Water.org webpages and social media channels (Twitter and YouTube), associated reports, water and sanitation campaigning webpages and documents produced between 2007 and 2021. The review of the charities' webpages and social media channels focuses on strategic objectives, project implementation, partnerships and development approach. The analysis maps patterns of neoliberal logics as well as discursive and material spaces of alternative development (re)produced by and productive of the charities' strategy to address the water crisis. In this way, we examine the potential of this alternative line of flight to create a new rhizome and move beyond capitalism.

5. Water.org

Water.org is a global non-profit organization whose aim is to bring water and sanitation to the world. The charity was founded by Matt Damon, an actor and film producer, and Gary White, a civil and environmental engineer with experience in water and sanitation projects, who is also its CEO. As stated in its vision, Water.org seeks to “spur system change at all levels – local, national, and global” expanding “the flow of capital into the sector, addressing the most significant barrier to achieving universal access to water and sanitation.” (Water.org, n.d.a). Since its foundation in 2009, the charity grew steadily, reporting revenues of USD5.96 million in 2009 and USD24.62 million in 2019, up 313 % in a decade. Its solution to the water crisis goes through a range of approaches, including the WaterCredit Initiative®, the asset manager WaterEquity Global Access Fund – a USD150 million private investment fund – and, in general, the mobilisation of big capital. As Damon put it when Water.org launched its WaterEquity fund, “the problems are so massive in dollar terms, you will never get there with philanthropy alone. You have to bring in the real money.” (Booth, 2019).

Indeed, while it was originally driven by a seemingly disinterested desire to solve the ‘global water crisis’ – as explained in Water.org's page on Damon, the actor committed to helping solve the ‘global water crisis’ while filming a movie in Zambia in 2006 and witnessing the everyday struggles of people lacking access to safe water and toilets (Water.org, n.d.b) –Water.org is currently fully embedded, and thriving, into the capitalist logics of growth and accumulation. Solving the water crisis is of course still central in the mission of Water.org, but this is being increasingly obscured (as illustrated by its annual reports over the years)

by a desire to mobilise big money and unleash the full power of capital to improve the human condition. Rather than being a social resource and a commons, water, in Water.org's vision and deeds, has been fully reterritorialised into a commodity. This is well exemplified by the WaterEquity fund, which was launched in 2019 to provide debt capital to high-performing financial institutions in emerging markets and thus push forward the capitalist frontier in countries with large populations living without access to safe water and sanitation. Under this logic, families living in poverty are no longer framed as people in need, but rather as an undercapitalized market worth as much as USD18 billion. As White explained:

In a world where the debate is so often set up as a competition between economic growth and saving the planet, water and sanitation investments, like the WaterEquity Global Access Fund allow investors to do both [...] this fund provides investors with a strong opportunity for diversification, as its investments have a low correlation with traditional asset classes (WaterEquity, 2019: 1).

Capitalism thus captured the line of flight that established a new relation of exteriority between the newly formed charity, Water.org, and people in need of clean water in Eastern Africa and South Asia (the regions where Water.org launched its first programmes). Still more, capitalism absorbed this line of flight, reterritorialising a market on it and allowing the development of a new rhizome whose connection with solving the ‘global water crisis’ is difficult to be grasped. Indeed, this rhizome branched out to large investment banks like The Bank of America, water bottling companies such as Danone AQUA and Niagara Bottling, soda manufacturers like the PepsiCo foundation, and garment companies as Levi's® and Inditex, which are all funding partners of Water.org and WaterEquity (Water.org, n.d.d).

Even though the commercial logic behind these alliances can be easily grasped, Water.org's choice of partners also seems naïve, contradictory and short-sighted. Asian and African societies have been trying to improve community-based infrastructure well before the colonial rule (McGoey, 2015), and many countries and communities made significant efforts to secure and maintain access to water for all (see for instance Anand's (2017) account of the politics of water infrastructure in Mumbai, and Kooy and Bakker's (2015) research on urban water supply in Jakarta). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s (following the 1970s financial crisis), the rigid lending conditions imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) forced poor countries to dismantle or transfer public assets – including water services – to private companies based in the US or Europe (Goldman, 2007; Varoufakis, 2015). The causes of poor water services in Asia and Africa are structural and can be traced back to decades of resources exploitation and austerity programmes. Money alone, cannot be the only way to solve these problems. The contradiction becomes even more striking when we look at some of Water.org's partners. Niagara Bottling, for instance, has been directly involved in controversies and legal battles with local communities about water pumping in several aquifers across the United States (Spear, 2014). Pepsi has also been implicated in similar controversies, and in 2017, traders in India boycotted the company and other soft drinks producers for their excessive use of scarce national water resources (The Guardian, 2017). Also, and with regard to Inditex and Levi's, we can for example observe that the garment industry is one of the most polluting in the world, it has often been linked to modern slavery¹ and that it takes 3,781 L of water to make a pair of jeans.

Water.org's funders and partners inevitably influence its priorities. As outlined in the charity's latest annual report, 38 % of its revenues comes from foundations (including corporate ones), 27 % from corporations, and only 31 % from individuals (Water.org, 2019). Based on these premises, the oath to solve the ‘global water crisis’ can only be a

¹ Refer for instance to the reports published by the Global Slavery Index: <https://www.globallslaveryindex.org/>.

commodified one, and the deeds, are likely to involve a purchase. As an example, in 2019, [Water.org](#) and Stella Artois celebrated World Water Day with the #PourItForward campaign: for every chalice sold, Stella Artois pledged to trigger a donation that will give “access to 5 years of clean water for one person in the developing world.” ([Stella Artois, 2019](#)). And if we look at what [Water.org](#) does at the local level, its vision of safe water for all is dependent on the exploration of “new markets and financial solutions to help end the global water crisis” ([Water.org, n.d.c](#)). The charity thus places the emphasis on microcredit and on partnerships with local banks, and in its rhizome, certain branches – those that would lead to working with governments, involving local communities through participatory approaches, and providing systemic solutions to the water crisis – do not seem able to send out roots.

6. WaterAid

WaterAid was founded in 1981 by the UK water industry, “motivated to help this Decade [i.e. Water and Sanitation Decade] energetically” ([NWC, 1981](#): 2). Whilst not a celebrity-led organisation, WaterAid relies on several celebrity supporters such as Hugh Bonneville, Ellie Simmonds and Nadiya Hussain. Moreover, King (then Prince) Charles III has been the president of WaterAid since 1991. WaterAid’s statement on his proclamation aptly illustrates how the ‘celebrity’ is mobilised to promote WaterAid and a marked-based vision of charity work and development. The king is presented as a “driving force”, praised for his “hugely significant role over the past decades on critical global issues”. Specifically, they claim, Charles III successfully spearheaded the Sustainable Market Initiative, “to convene the private sector to be a real catalyst to accelerate the transition to a sustainable future”.²

Over time, the charity has grown into a well-established organisation, with a wide geographical reach and thematic focus. Today, WaterAid works in 28 countries, has a consolidated annual budget of approximately £ 91 million ([WaterAid UK, 2019](#))³ and plays an influential role in global water governance. The charity focuses on multiple dimensions of the water crisis – access, sustainability, climate resilience, emergency – through a portfolio of activities ranging from service delivery, evidence-based policy and campaigning work. With the memberships of WaterAid America and Australia (2004), Sweden (2009), Japan (2013) and India (2016) it has become a truly global organisation. The normative values of WaterAid are embodied in its mission to “transform the lives of the poorest and most marginalised people by improving access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene” and the vision of “a world where everyone, everywhere has safe water, sanitation and hygiene” ([WaterAid UK, 2017](#)). This is a potentially revolutionary line of flight that threatens capitalist logics and is, therefore, internalized by industry and governments: the charity is separated from the practices and normative processes that sustain its meaning and reterritorialized as a new expression of capitalist relationships. Emblematic of this process are the tensions between the normative values that place poor and vulnerable people at the core of the charity’s work and its accountability to donors who, ultimately, are its ‘clients’. The charity’s reliance on donors and the pursue of cognitive legitimacy (i.e. the desire to be acknowledged as an expert by the system) push WaterAid to prioritise capitalist logics and the development strategies that donors’ organizations embody and promote, rather than promoting inclusive development and fostering alternative development and system change ([Rusca](#)

² The full (short) statement is available at: WaterAid’s statement on Proclamation of His Majesty, King Charles III (accessed on 27 October 2022).

³ The charity is funded by the water industry, private donations and through grants. In 2019, individual supporters contributed £48.7m, corporate and trust supporters £21.1m, other WaterAid member countries £12.8m, governments and other institutions £11.1m, and other income £0.5m ([WaterAid UK, 2019](#)). The charity aims at reaching 67% of unrestricted funding to ensure its independence ([WaterAid UK, 2018](#)).

and Schwartz, 2012).

WaterAid’s collective assemblage of enunciation reflects these dynamics in the tensions between the aspiration of system strengthening and system change. WaterAid’s strategy (2017), for instance, focuses on technical-financial, behavioural and managerial changes, rather than systemic change. Despite an intimate knowledge of the water sector, the critique of the system that has produced WaSH inequalities is very limited. Reports frequently mention facts and statistics about water, toilets and hygiene inequalities, without questioning the fundamental processes underlying the crisis. In line with this approach, prominent in its policy and strategy documents, is the idea that “by strengthening every part of the systems involved, from the national to the local and adapting to each context, we make sure communities feel the benefits long after we have gone” ([WaterAid UK, 2018](#): 10). Similarly, it is claimed that “relatively small, targeted investments into strengthening systems can substantially improve service efficiency, effectiveness, accountability and sustainability, and reach more people for longer, with less wastage” ([WaterAid UK, 2018](#): 11). In these narratives, what is challenged is the weak performance of the system ([WaterAid UK, 2020](#)), rather than the system itself. Coherently, WaterAid devotes a large amount of its resources to capacity building of local and national governments, utilities and, “where appropriate” private sector, to improve coordination, planning, and performance. At the same time, WaterAid partly escapes this structure by promoting normative values close to its mission. Elsewhere in these reports, the charity questions the ability of the current system to challenge inequalities and achieve inclusive services. WaterAid also critiques inadequate and unequal resource distribution that prevent from reaching those in greatest need ([WaterAid UK, 2017](#)) and advocates for tariffs and subsidies that work for poor people to be disbursed by governments ([WaterAid UK, 2011](#)). However, in this play between system strengthening and system change, the latter is significantly less prominent.

The reterritorialization of WaterAid has profound implications on the assemblage of water and sanitation services for the urban poor. WaterAid’s projects consistently promote capitalist logics, including for profit social enterprises, private entrepreneurship and full cost recovery principles. Several projects focus on supporting commercialised water utilities to reach financial sustainability ([WaterAid UK, 2018](#)) or on upscaling market based approaches to sanitation, including Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) ([WaterAid US, 2008](#)), communal pay per use toilet blocks ([WaterAid US, 2009](#)), and other “no subsidy” approaches ([WaterAid US, 2008](#): 21). Although WaterAid seeks to combine these capitalist logics and its mission/visions into a “win-win reform framework” that works for people (i.e. universal access) and its commercial partners (i.e. market expansion) ([WaterAid UK, 2011](#)), financial objectives often prevail over social ones. In Maputo, Mozambique, CLTS approaches have contributed to the reterritorialization of sanitation into a private responsibility in urban low-income areas, where “latrines are something that is planned at household level. What the government does is to promote, sensitize people to construct” ([Rusca et al., 2022](#)). In Lilongwe, Malawi, a partnership with the commercialised Water Board to ensure revenue collection from the water kiosks has led to the establishment of community-based Water Users Associations (WUAs). WUAs are tasked with selling water at the kiosks and collecting revenue for the water utility, who supplies kiosks with water at a subsidised price. Whilst on paper these organisations might appear as a successful case of commoning of water services, paradoxically, low-income dwellers end up paying 4–5 times more for water than high income residents as the cost of running the WUAs are passed on to water users. WUAs are run by local elites, motivated to increase water tariffs to their customers, to augment their profit margins and salaries ([Rusca et al., 2015](#)). The hierarchical leadership of WUAs and their profit motif lead to a local reterritorialization of water services into a commodity that undermines the ability of poor urban dwellers to access water.

In concluding this section, we note that as WaterAid is constantly (re) assembled through multiple processes of becoming, its development

approach works with rather than against or beyond capitalist logics set in motion by wider economic processes. Ultimately, the charity contributes to reterritorializing the bodies of poor urban dwellers into customers, basic services into market opportunities, and citizenship into a variegated right across urban spaces.

7. Safe water network

SWN is a non-profit organization that operates in India and Ghana, with an office in New York. Since its establishment in 2006, SWN has been closely related with philanthropic capital. The actor Paul Newman and the former Goldman Sachs co-chairman and former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John Whitehead figure among its founders. In 2019, the board included current and former representatives of private investment firms, multinational companies and senior researchers. SWN activities are funded by private foundations (Conrad Hilton Foundation, Stone Family Foundation, PepsiCo Foundation), celebrities, politicians, media and international donors (the World Bank, USAID, The Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands) (SWN, 2019). Besides the support of private capital, the organization is endorsed by the governments of Ghana and India.

SWN promotes a model of community-entrepreneurialism that is revealing of the workings of reterritorialization processes. The organization presents itself as a facilitator “to develop and demonstrate affordable, economically viable solutions, to share sector knowledge, and to build partnerships that reach millions in underserved communities” (SWN, n.d.). As such, SWN responds to global concerns for extending access to safe and affordable water to marginalized groups in rural and *peri-urban* areas historically neglected by public and private interventions. The inclusion of the word “safe water” in the name of the charity underscores an attention for water quality and the compliance with standards set by national public authorities. This in turn could be interpreted as a potential line of flight, a commitment to public health. SWN’s mission to “empower communities” to own and manage their local water supply schemes represents another line of flight that could potentially threaten the logic of privatization that underpins the water sector in countries like Ghana where SWN is active (Bartels et al., 2018). In the case of Ghana, the aim of community empowerment aligns with water sector policies and with calls by civil society organizations to foster participation in water governance (Yates and Harris, 2018; Morville and Harris, 2014).

However, an examination of the enunciations and bodies forming SWN assemblage reveals that these lines of flight are readily reabsorbed within a capitalistic logic. Together with community empowerment, SWN promotes a market-based approach to water provision including a shift from a beneficiary to a consumer model. Commitment towards safe water is inscribed in a process of commodification where the provision of water that meets quality standards (safe) is presented as an incentive for promoting willingness to pay for water. Moreover, financial goals tend to be prioritized over social ones. Revenue generation, capital collection, impacts of increase in tariffs, willingness to pay are key themes of reports produced by SWN. In one of these reports, explaining the choice to invest in household connections SWN writes “HHC [household connection] consumers use approximately-four times more water on a per-capita basis compared to those without HHCs (60 LPCD versus 15 LPCD), resulting in higher revenues that strengthen the long-term viability of the water enterprise” (Hwang and Yeboah, 2018:1). This passage is also illustrative of the kind of language used by SWN, which tends to focus on capital recovery (rather than universal access to water). This language is also used by its donors such as the Stone Family Foundation, an advocate of market-based approaches in the water sector. As in the case of WaterAid, promoting cost-recovery, professionalization and water pricing, aligns with wider processes of neoliberalisation that are shaping the water sector as a whole, and thus ensures that SWN continues to receive (financial) support from private partners, donor agencies and governments.

SWN’s community-entrepreneurial model is assembled through a diversity of bodies. SWN facilitates the establishment and operation of ‘Safe Water Stations’ that are run as Small Water Enterprise (SWE) by (some) members of a local community. Stations are installed and run through different forms of public–private partnerships including Build-Operate-Transfer and cost-sharing agreements between SWN and local level administrations (SWN, 2018). The initial costs of installing a station are covered by grants from private foundations and companies or by government funding with communities contributing in kinds by providing land to build the station and access to a source of water (Interview traditional community leader, 2017, Accra, Ghana). Operation and maintenance costs and further capital investments are covered by the fee collected from the sale of water by the bucket, through household connections and in few cases in bulk (Worsham et al., 2018). In the long term, SWN commits to hand over the ownership and management of the stations to local communities, yet, as of 2017, this did not happen in the case of Ghana (Interview SWN staff Ghana, Accra, 2017). In 2021, according to its website, SWN managed 92 stations in Ghana and 350 in India providing water to 133 and 319 communities respectively for a total of about 1.6 million people supplied and 1.4 million USD of local water revenues (SWN, n.d.). Financial sustainability is at the core of the management of the stations, meaning that water prices are adjusted accordingly and new technologies such as smart meters and educational programs are implemented to improve cost-recovery, at times to the detriment of social objectives. For instance, to maintain financial performance in 2016 SWN Ghana raised water prices by 33–50 % in 29 of its 35 stations prompting households with lower socio-economic status to decrease their purchase and use of safe water (Worsham et al., 2018). Furthermore, the aim of improving sales also led to the introduction of customer loyalty programs such as donating 20L free water after buying five 20L cans over time have been introduced (Worsham et al., 2018, Interview SWN Staff Ghana, Accra, 2017). For the case of Ghana, it is important to underline that despite this increase being introduced after engaging with communities and local administrations (*ibid.*), there is hardly any public monitoring on price setting mechanisms, operation and customer services at SWN’s stations. This is because SWN, as tanker drivers and water vendors operating in Accra (Alba et al., 2019), is formally not a water provider thus it is not regulated by the Public Utility Regulatory Commission, a public authority formally responsible for public utilities performance in the country. Another example of SWN capitalistic reterritorialization is the development of a Water Enterprise Trust (around 60 million USD). Although the Trust is still in its planning phase, it promises to attract international capital to support future expansion of stations and capital recovery accounts of the existing stations.

To conclude, actual outcomes in terms of improving access to water remain unclear as literature of SWN is very limited, our analysis suggest SWN’s community entrepreneurial models reflects and perhaps tends to reinforce the reterritorialization of capitalistic logics transforming people into customers and favouring financial objectives over social ones.

8. Conclusions

The above discussion raised important questions about the contradictory relationship between capitalism and charity, the geographies of philanthrocapitalism and the very nature of giving in the water sector. We have shown how global water charities reproduce, and are produced by, the ideas and processes that have more generally determined the neoliberalisation of the water crisis. In doing so, the paper contributes to scholarship on critical water geography and development studies, shedding new light on the emergence of philanthrocapitalism in the water sector, and more in general, on the NGO-fication of global governance and the commodification and marketisation of development initiatives. In our adoption of assemblage thinking, we also emphasised how lines of flight are crucial to fully appreciate the concept of the rhizome and

understand its formation. Lines of flight provide insight into territorialising and deterritorialising movements, and are thus relevant to geographical interpretations of assemblage thinking, in spite of the limited attention that they have received until now.

Through our analysis we observed how capitalism systematically interrupts and absorbs the lines of flight drawn by charity to ensure its same survival. We outlined how the three charities deterritorialise – differently but in an interconnected way – water into a commodity, reterritorialising it on commercial and (micro)financial circuits. Water charities must navigate through normative values, cognitive legitimacy, the need to perform for donors while also serving their beneficiaries, and all this happens through the reproduction of capitalism and of its operating mechanisms. Assemblage thinking allows to tease out this complexity, whilst at the same time suggesting that other rhizomes can be formed and other possible charity assemblages can be actualised and, thus, that there are multiple processes of becoming and alternative forms of a ‘water charity’.

The questions that we have explored are aimed at encouraging new research that further unpacks other ways of being charitable beyond the Anglo-American context, looking at other non-faith-based (but also faith-based) forms of solidarity from, for instance, South America, China, Russia or Southern Europe. Clearly, not all charities operate in the same way and not all donors-beneficiaries relations are the same, and more research is needed to understand what would happen if the aforementioned interruptions of the lines of flight drawn by charity could be avoided. And more radically, once we understand how capitalism captures and internalises these lines of flight, how could this help us to conceive a post-capitalist world? What lines of flight we would need to escape the philanthrocapitalist assemblage, destabilise the despotic capitalist machine and produce a new sociopolitical model? What alliances would charities need to form and develop to deterritorialise the commodification of water? Further research is needed to answer these questions and to conceive more inclusive models and solutions to the water crisis.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Filippo Menga: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Resources, Data curation. **Maria Rusca:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Resources, Data curation, Methodology. **Rossella Alba:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Resources, Data curation, Methodology.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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