

BOLIVIA

➔ WHEN THE WATER RATES IN COCHABAMBA, Bolivia skyrocketed overnight, many people found themselves having to choose between food and water. Given a choice between two basic necessities, they chose revolution instead.

This January, exactly six years after the water revolt began, the people of Cochabamba declared victory, ending a battle that pitted South America's poorest nation against multinational engineering giant Bechtel Corporation.

In the late 1990s, the World Bank made financial assistance to Bolivia dependent on the privatization of the city's public water system. A Bechtel subsidiary took over the water supply in 1999 and instituted rate hikes of as much as 200 percent. The people of Cochabamba responded by forming the Coalition in Defense of Water and Life – known as La Coordinadora – to fight for their water rights.

Over the next four months, strikes and rallies organized by La Coordinadora shut down the city of Cochabamba three times. Thousands of people flocked to the city's central plaza with the rallying cry, *El Agua es Nuestra Carajo!* ("The Water is Ours, Damn It!"). In clashes with Bolivian soldiers, 175 people were injured, an unarmed boy was killed and several coalition leaders were arrested. When people refused to pay their water bills, Bechtel threatened to cut off their water supply. The Democracy Center distributed on-the-ground updates around the world by email, and the Cochabambinos' campaign gained international attention and support.

In 2000, the people won their first major battle when the Bolivian government cancelled the privatization contract. Bechtel refused to walk away, however, and in 2002, the company filed a legal case in a World Bank trade court seeking \$50 million from Bolivia for losses and unearned profits. La Coordinadora and its allies organized a four-year global campaign calling on Bechtel to drop the case. Last month, the company agreed to settle in exchange for a token payment equal to 30 cents.

Oscar Olivera, a leader of La Coordinadora, summed up the significance the victory: "When we thought that the most important human values had been wrested from us, when we thought we were incapable of overcoming fear, of having the ability to organize and unite, when we no longer believed we could make our voices heard, then our humble,

simple, and hard-working people – men, women, children and the elderly – demonstrated to the country and to the world that all this is still possible."

Laura Fauth

GHANA

➔ A GROUP OF BRIGHTLY CLAD WOMEN AND meticulously groomed men gather in the unforgiving heat of Accra's most congested slum. Women wipe the sweat from their brows with handkerchiefs that they alternately use to swat away flies. A man stands in the center of the group and is making a fiery speech. He is a member of the Ghana Homeless People's Federation, an offshoot of Slum Dwellers International (SDI), a global grassroots movement that is taking the DIY concept and doing it right.

These men and women have a lot on their agenda: building toilets, clearing roads, constructing drainage systems and collecting enough money to make it all happen. Soon after this meeting is over, a designated member will visit families in her community with a tin canister in hand. Tattered bills will be thrown into the pot; bills that were earned doing things like laying cement, selling food or sewing clothes.

The idea is one person with one dollar may be economically impotent, but 30,000 people with one dollar each can pull a mighty political punch. The collective economy has proven effective, most noticeably where the idea for SDI was born, in Mumbai, India. In the mid 1980s, a group of women pavement dwellers developed savings cooperatives. They then scoured the city looking for land that wasn't being used and approached the government with not just a housing plan but some capital to back it up. The powers that be responded.

Since then, federations have emerged from South Africa to Brazil, with members teaching each other new tactics by visiting other communities. Someone from India may show up in Zimbabwe or someone from Ghana in Cambodia. They exchange ideas about everything from how to build a toilet to how to successfully lobby the government for clean water.

It's a potent global groundswell of activism that takes development out of the offices of international agencies and puts it into the hands of the urban poor. And it shows no sign of slowing down.

Jaime Jacques

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