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Public resistance to privatisation in water and energy

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, development agencies and international institutions have promoted private-sector involvement in infrastructure, assuming that this would inject both investment and efficiency into the under-performing public sector. In the water and energy sectors, these expectations have not been fulfilled. Private-sector investment in developing countries is falling, multinational companies have failed to make sustainable returns on their investments, and the process of privatisation in water and energy has proved widely unpopular and encountered strong political opposition. This paper examines the role of this opposition in delaying, cancelling, or reversing the privatisation of water and energy. Local civil society has successfully mobilised highly effective political activity, its opposition being based on the perceived conflicts between privatisation and equity, and over the role of the state and community in these sectors. Such opposition has involved dynamic interactions with existing political parties and

structures, including the use of existing electoral and judicial mechanisms. Its success poses challenges for the multilateral and donor community, NGOs, the opposition campaigns themselves, and the future of national systems of electricity and water.

Additional information

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David Hall is director of the Public Services International Privatisation Research Unit (PSIRU), specialising in water, energy, and healthcare, and the design and maintenance of the database and website. Previously at the Public Services Privatisation Research Unit, he has published books on public expenditure and labour law. d.j.hall@gre.ac.uk.

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