

REVIEW

BOOK

**The Water Defenders: How Ordinary People Saved a Country from Corporate Greed**

By Robin Broad and John Cavanagh

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“Our water is contaminated... Our farms dried up and cracked. And then died for lack of water. If it [mining] continues we will run out of water” (translated from Filipino), a Tawali Ifugao woman from the northern region of the Philippines stated to a visiting documentary team (Legal Rights and Natural Resources Center 2020). It could well be the statement of Marcelo Rivera, a protagonist in Robin Broad and John Cavanagh’s *The Water Defenders*. The book begins with a stark recounting of how Marcelo went missing for weeks until his body was found in an abandoned well. A testament to torture, his body was barely recognizable. Three more would be murdered: Ramiro Rivera, Dora Sorto, and Juan Francisco Duran. All four were part of community resistance against mining in their lands.

*The Water Defenders* is an affidavit of the struggles of peoples, an opus chapter of a life’s work, and a heartening memorial. It is at once a cautionary report.

*The Water Defenders* presents a witnessing, a sober narration of how communities took to the frontlines to defend environmental commons—their “struggle for clean and affordable water... defending their air and land, their health, and their rights to defend themselves against corporate incursions” (Broad and Cavanagh 2021, 3)—ultimately to defend their ways of life against multinational mining corporations Pacific Rim and OceanaGold. We are invited to a retelling of the David and Goliath story set in a globalized world, where communities empower themselves as they clash with predatory corporate interests. It is at the same time the King Midas story set in a postcolonial world, reincarnated as “Big Gold,” where mining corporations colonize community lands. It is not without irony that the gold-rich territory in the Salvadoran mountains is called El Dorado after the mythical kingdom thought to

harbor vast amounts of gold, which sent Spanish conquistadores on their frenetic search. Modern El Dorado has been found in El Salvador.

In the unfolding story, a range of people, ecologies, and ideas are introduced. Over the course of the book, we learn of the arrival of a new kind of white men, this time in suits, who bring every piece of mining equipment into the mountains. They tell people these are implements of modernization, announcing progress is at hand. Conservative politicians and activist-defenders are brought together as strange bedfellows in a tactical alliance to protect environmental commons. A fledgling government, harkening to calls for self-determination, is sued by a multinational corporation in a little known but powerful tribunal of the World Bank. Solidarities are built across borders. Humble folks stay the line amidst pressures designed to divide and terrorize them, insistent on their notions of nature and landscapes, and that “water is life.” In no small measure, Broad and Cavanagh propound, “To say that this story of the Water Defenders versus Big Gold holds keys to reversing the outsized power of global corporations today is not an exaggeration” (3).

The work neither claims to offer any new scholarly insight, nor problematize current discourses. That is not its intention; rather, it is a work that invites to advocate and is a reiteration of a point. Its contributions lie in the insistence on presenting a case-in-fact and telling it simply. It is the saga of the water defenders itself that proposes the imperative. The story presents a counternarrative to the dominant and all too often homogenized conception of development (Escobar 1995)—a notion that continues to play off the characterization of southern countries as either underdeveloped or developing, never quite up to global standards. El Salvador is shaped and conditioned by its colonial history, its terrible civil war, and its line of ruling fascists who caused the deaths of thousands. Broad and Cavanagh quote what Joan Didion said of El Salvador, “Terror is the given of the place” (13). Its gaping poverty, domestic violence, and its government marked with corruption would eventually characterize it as one of many states in the southern region, rendering it almost unremarkable. Later, an antagonist would describe El Salvador as a “market-oriented Central American nation” (Broad and Cavanagh 2021, 99). The complexity of its history is redacted. It is battered, with only its natural resources to raise it to its feet.

The redaction conveniently readies a template for universalization—a prescription for development, a process that derives power from erasure (Tsing 2004). When mining prospectors, white men in suits, go into the Salvadoran mountain to find gold, their very practice of exploration and eventual mining—“in the middle of towns...breaking fences, disturbing property” (Broad and Cavanagh 2021, 55)—ignores and erases community practices and conditions of production by supplanting their own, thereby erasing the communities’ relationship with the river, its very meaning, with contamination.

Underpinning the story is the interrogation of the power relations that shape dominant conceptions of development (extractive and exploitative) and ways of doing (market driven and capital intensive), ultimately the universal slogan for an economic paradigm founded on neoliberalism. Broad and Cavanagh describe new circuits of terror. In the chapter “Legal Terror, Global Extortion,” they unpack how terror seeps through new instruments—how the realities and lives of peoples on the ground can be determined by contractual agreements and legal documents interpreted and decided by strangers in a faraway land (implicating the seemingly innocuous but abstracted tribunal of the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes)—and how this new terror instigates old terrors.

While scholars would argue that this characterization of development is long passé and overdrawn, we, however, continue to see it take form, transpire, and impact peoples’ lives. The conception of the Anthropocene, both as the state of things and as a critique, and how notions of modernity have us careening to usher in development speak to our planetary and climate crises. El Salvador could be the Philippines or Mozambique. *The Water Defenders* could be the memorial of the many El Dorados in the world, far-off places that are often forgotten save for the Midas in the hunt for gold. Broad and Cavanagh remind us that corporate interests are often contradictory to meaningful development.

Supporters of a capital-focused development paradigm could call the work to task for the lack of empirical data and its implications on macroeconomics. For how else could a world that has grown dependent on technology manufactured from gold, nickel, and other minerals run simply on flowing rivers and verdant forests? Broad and Cavanagh’s counterarguments are imbedded in the narrative. By presenting the story of the water defenders, an alternative development paradigm is offered: one that speaks to communities’ cultural affirmation, neither quixotic nor romantic, but rather attuned, self-educated, and cognizant of the true cost of development, thereby engaging modernity’s crises.

*The Water Defenders* provides a glimpse into Broad and Cavanagh’s work and engagement. This glimpse offers another invitation: how might a development worker or a social scientist move from observation, documentation, and analysis—while in practice as truthful and sensitive, yet neutral and passive as to be objective—to engaged comrades working in solidarity? Their report contains anecdotes, stories and conversations, patiently heard not once but likely over again, with the appreciation that the others telling the story have told it over and over in the hopes that someone would listen and join their cause.

Half a cautionary tale, *The Water Defenders* is at its heart a tale of hope—where Salvadoran communities saved themselves and their environs, ultimately lending truth to their call *agua es vida*. It is testament to the possibility of paradigm shift and that the alternative paradigm can very well be the beginnings of a solution to modernity’s crises, as El Salvador becomes the first country in the world to ban gold and metal mining.

## References

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