Hosepipe bans won't save us

Filippo Menga | 12th August 2025 | © Creative Commons 4.0

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The deeper crisis behind the UK's water shortages.

This summer hosepipe bans return across parts of the UK and friendly advice echoes through headlines and social media feeds: take shorter showers, let your lawn go brown, don't fill the paddling pool.

The message is clear: if only we adjusted our habits, there would be enough water to go around.

What feels relatively novel in Britain has long been routine elsewhere. In Southern Europe – Italy, Spain, Greece and beyond – seasonal water restrictions have been a familiar part of life for years.

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And yet, even where people have learned to expect them, the underlying problem has never been resolved. Hosepipe bans may become normalised, but they do not fix the deeper failures of how water is governed.

As I argue in *Thirst: The Global Quest to Solve the Water Crisis*, these crises are not simply about how much water we use in our homes. They are the product of decades of underinvestment, privatisation and political neglect that have hollowed out the resilience of water systems.

In England, this legacy is unmistakable. Since the privatisation of the water industry in 1989, companies have paid out billions in shareholder dividends while neglecting the very infrastructure that sustains the country.

Every day, an estimated three billion litres of treated water are lost through leaks in England and Wales alone, equivalent to around 1,200 Olympic-sized swimming pools or 113 litres per household per day.

This is more than enough to meet the daily needs of millions and highlights a chronic failure to maintain essential infrastructure.

Shortages

England and Wales are also the only places in Europe where water services have been fully privatised, a model rolled out under Margaret Thatcher's government.

At the time, the industry faced mounting pressure to comply with strict European Community standards on water quality and pollution, standards that investment-starved public authorities were ill-equipped to meet.

Thatcher's administration argued that only private capital could deliver the infrastructure [illegible]aul required to satisfy European regulations. Yet, ironically, these EU rules ceased to

apply post-Brexit, while the privatised, shareholder-focused water model remained intact.

Wetlands that once buffered droughts and floods have been drained or degraded, and ageing pipes have been left to deteriorate, compounding the system's vulnerability.

Regulation has done little to enforce ecological protection or hold private companies to account. When shortages hit, households are told to tighten their taps, while commercial extraction and corporate profits continue largely undisturbed.

> ***"Hosepipe bans may ease immediate pressure, but they cannot repair decades of neglect or undo the cultural shift that turned water into a commodity."***

Morality

At the same time, the UK is failing to tackle another threat to its water: pollution. A recent assessment found the country is falling behind international efforts to combat microplastics.

While the EU and US are introducing enforceable limits on microplastics in water and wastewater, the UK continues to regulate only microbeads in cosmetics – a tiny fraction of the problem.

Scientists are calling for a national roadmap with measurable targets, product design standards, and interventions in high-emission sectors like textiles, agriculture and sewage sludge disposal.

This makes clear that while individual households are being asked to conserve water, the real pollutants – fragmented plastics and industrial contaminants streaming through rivers and fields – are being overlooked.

It is yet another example of a deeper shift: the transfer of responsibility. What was once a collective duty of governments and utilities to ensure safe, sufficient water has been reframed as a matter of personal morality and consumer behaviour.

Protect

By commodifying water, the burden of managing scarcity is passed down to individuals, absolving the very systems that created the crisis.

And this governance failure becomes even more fragile in the face of a changing climate.

Of course, the climate is changing. Hotter, drier summers and erratic rainfall are amplifying pressures on water systems everywhere.

But climate breakdown alone does not explain why a spell of dry weather so easily becomes a crisis. What turns a drought into a systemic failure is how societies choose to manage, or mismanage, the water they have.

The UK is not an arid country. It receives more than enough annual rainfall to meet its needs. Yet without well-maintained infrastructure, healthy ecosystems to store and filter water, and strong regulation to protect rivers and aquifers, this abundance is squandered.

Shifted

Climate change exposes these weaknesses, but it did not create them.

The same forces that have left pipes leaking, wetlands drained and regulators toothless are now colliding with a more volatile climate.

Together, they produce a fragile system where even modest environmental stress triggers emergency measures. And while households are told to save water, industrial users and polluters continue largely unchecked.

What is unfolding in the UK is both a political and cultural crisis. Water has been recast as a commodity, stripped of its social and ecological meaning and managed primarily as an economic asset.

This logic of commodification shapes not only infrastructure and regulation, but also how scarcity is understood. When water becomes just another commodity, the burden of shortage is shifted onto individuals rather than the systems that govern it.

Inheritance

In Cape Town, this dynamic was laid bare during the 2018 'Day Zero' crisis. For decades, the city’s poorest residents in informal settlements had lived without reliable access to piped water, and their daily struggles went largely unnoticed.

It was only when drought restrictions began to affect the city’s affluent neighbourhoods, areas accustomed to lush gardens, swimming pools and unlimited supply, that water scarcity was suddenly framed as a collective emergency.

Wealthy households were told to ration themselves to 50 litres a day, and for the first time the privileged experienced what the poor had endured all along.

The crisis revealed what happens when the culture of water governance is dominated by market logic: access becomes normalised for some, precarious for others, and systemic inequality is ignored until it touches the powerful.

The same cultural shift has taken place in England and Wales. By privatising water, Thatcher’s government embedded the idea that water should serve the market first and society second. That cultural inheritance has proved harder to reverse than any single drought or policy failure.

Reinvested

Hosepipe bans may ease immediate pressure, but they cannot repair decades of neglect or undo the cultural shift that turned water into a commodity.

As long as water is governed primarily for profit rather than as a shared lifeblood, the system will remain fragile, vulnerable to both climate extremes and corporate extraction.

There are other paths. Across Europe and beyond, cities and regions are reclaiming water as a public trust.

Paris ended private water concessions in 2010 and reinvested the savings in maintaining its network. Berlin, Naples and dozens of municipalities across Spain have followed similar routes.

Failures

Scotland kept water in public hands and avoided the governance failures seen in England and Wales. These examples show that democratic, non-market models of water management are not only possible but already working.

For the UK, this would mean moving beyond the illusion that individual restraint can solve a systemic crisis.

It would mean confronting the political and economic choices that have made the system so vulnerable: reversing decades of privatisation, strengthening regulation, restoring ecosystems and treating water not as a commodity to be sold but as a common good to be protected.

Until that happens, the same story will repeat itself: a dry summer becomes a crisis, the public is told to 'do their bit,' and the deeper failures of governance remain untouched.

This Author

Filippo Menga is an associate professor of geography at the University of Bergamo, visiting research fellow at the University of Reading and editor-in-chief of the journal Political Geography. His latest book is*Thirst: The Global Quest to Solve the Water Crisis* (Verso, 2025).

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