

Water is a human right

An international campaign to enshrine water as a human right at the United Nations

The Right to Water is the Right to Life

When the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drafted over 50 years ago, water was not included in the list of protected rights. The rationale was simple. Water, like air, was considered so fundamental to life that naming a right to it would have been redundant.

Times have changed

Despite the everyday dependence we have on water, access to fresh water is far from equal or guaranteed. Of the world's population of 6 billion, at least 1.5 billion people do not have access to clean drinking water and another 4 billion lack adequate sanitation services. In parts of the developing world, a child dies every 15 seconds due to easily preventable water-related diseases.

Global water corporations, international financial institutions, trade agreements, governments and even parts of the United Nations have been promoting privatization and commodification of water as a way to deal with this crisis.

But the evidence shows that privatization leads to rising water rates, unclean water – and of course, soaring corporate profits. Water should be safe, affordable, and accessible to everyone – not just those who can afford to pay.

Time for Action

Without action, inequality and human suffering will only worsen. The UN predicts that by 2025, the number of people deprived of water will climb to over 3 billion. Such disparity is an affront to the world's shared humanity and threatens our future security. Water scarcity is a common source of conflict in this new century and promises to become more so. And for many developing nations, the lack of proper infrastructure to deliver clean water only perpetuates and worsens poverty.

The only way to solve this crisis is to ensure that water remains under public control. Governments must enshrine the human right to water and protect the eco-systems that people and nature rely upon.

Friends of the Right to Water

In recognition that water is the essence of life, a group known as "The Friends of the Right to Water" (FRW) has begun an international campaign seeking to affirm the universal right to water. Building upon General Comment No. 15 (GC 15) adopted in November 2002 by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the FRW is inviting organizations to join in the effort to secure the right to water.

General Comment 15 notes that the right to water has already been established in a wide range of international documents and underscores the fundamental importance that water plays in the realization of all other human rights.

As it stands, all 144 signatories to the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights are bound by the pronouncements of GC 15. The problem is that countries can ignore their responsibilities because there is no effective means of holding them to account. The campaign proposed by the Friends of the Right to Water is working to create a binding means to hold these states accountable.

Water belongs to the earth and all species and is an inalienable human right that must not be appropriated for profit.

— Maude Barlow, *National Chairperson of The Council of Canadians and co-founder of The Blue Planet project.*