

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.



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,
The Council of Canadians

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.



Uruguay Victory an Inspiration to the Water Movement



On October 31, 2004, the people of Uruguay made history by being the first people in the world to vote on the human right to water.

By an almost two-thirds majority, the people of Uruguay voted to amend their constitution to ensure not only that access to piped water and sanitation is a fundamental human right available to everyone, but also that in the creation of water policies social considerations take precedence over economic considerations. Further, the constitution must now reflect that the "public service of water supply for human consumption will be served exclusively and directly by state legal persons" - that is to say, not by for-profit companies.

This referendum is a historic development and will form the basis of our campaign for a United Nations treaty on the right to water. The referendum in Uruguay was the result of a two-year grassroots fight led by a network called the National Commission for the Defence of Water and Life. It was composed of trade unions, human rights groups, and environmental organizations, including Friends of the Earth Uruguay. This fight also brought unprecedented support from the international civil society water movement, which provided funding, resource materials, a massive number of e-mails and letters of support, and visiting delegations who then took the story of this struggle back to their home countries. People in Argentina are now organizing to promote a similar constitutional amendment on the right to water.

Maude Barlow, the Council of Canadians' National Chairperson, was in Uruguay to witness this historical moment:

"The night before I left I spoke to hundreds of people at a big public forum, assuring them that their work had been worth it and that we would take their constitutional amendment and use it as the basis of an international campaign. But the standing ovation and tears came when I ended my speech with the words affirming that on October 31 "*Todos somos uruguayos*" - we are all Uruguayans."

The Right to Water Campaign

The Friends of the Right to Water is promoting a two-tiered strategy. We are encouraging our international partners to work with the UN to adopt a convention or treaty on the right to water. We are also encouraging local groups to push their governments and courts to recognize the human right to water. This 'inside-outside' strategy will be the most effective way to accomplish our goals.

The Uruguay constitutional amendment is a good example of how a grassroots initiative can press for and secure our rights. Where the rules exist for similar initiatives, we use them, where they don't we must find other ways to ensure the right to water. In some countries the strategy may need to be more localized, or focus on the court system.

On local, national and international levels, we must assert our right to water and demand recognition in the courts and parliaments of the world.

We are encouraging like-minded organizations to join us. The adoption of a strong treaty or convention on water is crucial to the international water justice campaign. Pro-privatization groups are already developing their own water convention. The time to act is now!

Take Action!

The Right to Water Campaign is being led by a network of international organizations, including the Council of Canadians' Blue Planet Project.

To get involved in the Right to Water Campaign, check out www.blueplanetproject.net, or email us at blueplanet@canadians.org.