Right to Water Resolution a Resounding Victory for Water Justice

Blue Planet Project Organizer Anil Naidoo, National Water Campaigner Meera Karunananthan, Bolivian UN Ambassador Pablo Salon and the Council's National Chairperson Maude Barlow are all smiles after the UN General Assembly passed the Human Right to Water and Sanitation resolution in July.

by Anil Naidoo

In the face of environmental chaos caused by climate change and the ongoing global water crisis, people around the world continue to fight for water justice. They are trying to gain control of their water resources and to ensure that their communities can protect their most vulnerable citizens. But the odds against them are increasing. Private water companies, some governments, and some international financial institutions have been trying to commodify and privatize water. These privatization efforts hit a major hurdle recently as the United Nations solidified its support for the human right to water and sanitation, a decision that has given new hope and inspiration in the quest for water justice.

On July 28, 2010, the United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly in favour of the human right to water and sanitation – a right that is essential for life itself. It is a right that is so basic that violation can result in death within mere days. Despite the well-documented and ongoing tragedy associated with lack of water and sanitation around the world, it took the United Nations General Assembly six decades to address its omission from the original Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

By a vote of 122 to 0 (with 41 abstentions, including Canada), the General Assembly approved resolution A/RES/64/292, The Human Right to Water and Sanitation. Some very powerful countries clearly stated their opposition including Canada, the United States and more than two-thirds of the European Union. Countries that voted in favour were primarily in the Global South, with the support of a handful of Northern states.

The spectacle of a group of wealthy, water-rich countries, including most of the European Union, all of whose citizens enjoy near universal realization of the human right to water and sanitation, doing everything they could to deny these same rights to countries whose people are suffering and dying from lack of access to clean water and adequate sanitation, was intolerable.

The human right to water demanded recognition of the human right to sanitation since one right is hollow without the other. Right now more than half the beds in the world are occupied by patients suffering from water-borne diseases. These preventable diseases kill more children than AIDS, smallpox and malaria combined. Clean water and sanitation are inevitably linked and must be delivered together.

THE RIGHT TO WATER TAKES ROOT IN BOLIVIA

Ten years ago the seeds of this resolution were planted in Bolivia, in a struggle that continues to inspire people globally. The citizens of Cochabamba, Bolivia, rose up against a water privatization scheme demanded by the World Bank, implemented by an illegitimate government, and delivered by Bechtel, a U.S. transnational water company.

The brutal injustice represented by the murder of 17-year-old protester Victor Hugo Daza by an army sniper for simply marching to defend the human right to water gave rise to a global water justice movement. Bolivians demonstrated to the world the power of resistance as they toppled a government and then elected the first modern indigenous president, Evo Morales. Bolivians took control of their water and natural resources and challenged the centuries-old pillaging of their country by global corporations.

A decade later the strong connection between Bolivians and water was realized at the United Nations as Bolivian Ambassador to the UN Pablo Solon put forward the human right to water and sanitation resolution.

This resolution is a clear statement by the nations of the world in the highest parliament in the world, explicitly supporting current and future water justice struggles by declaring water and sanitation to be human rights. It is now essential for states, including Canada, to ensure the realization of these rights and make clean, safe water and sanitation available to all.

There is renewed hope and expectation that this resolution will bring change, signalling new attention, advocacy and demands for investment in critical areas to ensure fulfillment of these rights and action against countries that violate them. The Blue Planet Project, with our international allies in the water movement, will progress from our work for recognition of the human right to water and sanitation to realization of these rights.

Water for All!

Anil Naidoo is the Blue Planet Project Organizer for the Council of Canadians.