

A National Disgrace: Canada's shameful position on the right to water

The Canadian government has tarnished its reputation on the world stage by continuing to oppose attempts to enshrine the right to water at the United Nations.

At the World Water Forum at The Hague in 2000, in Kyoto in 2003, and in Mexico City in 2006, Canada refused to recognize water as a human right. In 2002 and 2003, Canada was the only country to vote against United Nations (UN) resolutions on the human right to water, stating, "Canada does not accept that there is a right to drinking water and sanitation." The Harper government also played a key role in blocking a motion by Germany and Spain to officially recognize water as a human right at the UN Human Rights Council in March 2008.

On several occasions UN member states have pushed for recognition of the human right to water. Each time Canada rejected the efforts. Most recently, the Bolivian government has put forward a UN resolution for the human right to water and sanitation, which will be considered in late July 2010. The resolution has been endorsed by several other countries. The Canadian government, however, has not supported the resolution and may even be lobbying other countries to weaken it.

While the Canadian government has declared that water is an important issue, and that countries are responsible for ensuring that their own populations have access to water, the government has also clearly stated that it does not believe that international law should recognize the existence of a right to water. In the lead-up to the recent G8 and G20 summits held in Canada, Prime Minister Harper spoke about the importance of – and his government's commitment to – maternal and infant health. Death from preventable water-borne diseases continues to be a leading cause of death for children under five



in some areas of the Global South – deaths that could be prevented if water was declared a human right.

Background – The pressure mounts

Access to clean, fresh water is essential for people and nature, and the UN is now recognizing this as an urgent issue. In September 2007, at the 6th Session of the UN Human Rights Council, the High Commissioner for Human

Rights, Canadian Louise Arbour, presented her report outlining states' obligations under the right to water.

Madame Arbour's report called for stronger regulations governing water companies, including penalties for corporations that commit human rights abuses and restrict peoples' right to water.

In May 2006, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights rebuked Canada for its position on the right to water, saying it "regretted" Canada's continued opposition, and called on Canada to review its stand. The United Kingdom has reversed its initial opposition to the right to water and is now a supporter. Canada is becoming increasingly isolated as a growing number of states recognize the right to water.

The crisis

The global water crisis is already upon us. This crisis is not only due to water scarcity, but also because the international community has failed to adequately manage and provide water for all.

When the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights was written, no one could foresee a day when water would be a contested area. But in 2010, it is not an exaggeration to say that the lack of access to clean water is the greatest human rights violation in the world. Nearly two billion people live in water-stressed areas and three

billion have no running water within a kilometre of their homes. Every eight seconds a child dies of a water-borne disease, in every case preventable if there was access to clean water and adequate sanitation. And it is getting worse as the world runs out of clean water. A new World Bank reports says that by 2030, global demand for water will exceed supply by 40 per cent.

The solution

A binding convention on the right to water would outline the responsibility of international governments to provide safe drinking water for all people, regardless of the community or country they live in. Most importantly, water would be recognized as a fundamental right. This would ensure that access to safe water is not determined by one's ability to pay for it.

A UN convention on the right to water would establish clear reporting and redress mechanisms. It would also help put a stop to the rampant pollution, depletion and abuse of our water sources. States would be required to provide access to clean water and basic sanitation to all peoples within their borders. A convention would not require countries to provide water to others.

Guarantees

The global water crisis calls for good governance and for the political will to act. A UN Convention on the Right to Water could help guarantee that:

- Governments (not private companies) ensure access to safe water for drinking, food preparation and sanitation.
- Water is protected as a public trust and delivered as a public service on a not-for-profit basis.
- Environmental protections are instituted, ensuring a safe water supply.
- Water sources are preserved and protected from over-use, pollution, and diversions.

While the Bolivian resolution is not a binding convention, it is a beginning, and it will bring more attention and understanding to the importance of making water a human right. It's not too late for the Canadian government to reverse its position and become a champion for this fundamental right.

Take action!

Contact Prime Minister Stephen Harper today and demand that the Canadian government support the right to water and sanitation resolution at the United Nations.

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For more information about the Right to Water campaign, call us at 1-800-387-7177, or visit our websites at www.blueplanetproject.net or www.canadians.org.