

Frequently Asked Questions: The UN Right to Water and Sanitation

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.

For more than a decade the Council of Canadians' Blue Planet Project has worked with social movements to secure a UN covenant for the human right to water to ensure that billions of people around the globe can access the clean, safe water they need to live.

Here is some basic information about the right to water and what it would mean for Canada.

What is the human right to water?

The human right to water is the entitlement for everyone to access safe, clean, affordable water. It requires countries to provide the right to water for all people within their borders without discrimination. The right to water is also essential for the realization of other human rights, including the long established right to food, the right to health, the right to an adequate standard of living, and the right to life.

Why is it needed?

People need water to live. Without water – or with dirty, polluted water – people die. When the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights was written, no one expected to see a day when the need to ensure access to water would be so important. 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. Right now nearly 2 billion people live in water-stressed areas of the world and 3 billion have no running water within a kilometre of their

homes. Every eight seconds, a child dies of water-borne disease – deaths that would be easily preventable with access to clean, safe water.



Canada is not immune to this growing water crisis. Many First Nations communities are without access to clean, safe water. A human right to water would require our government to address this appalling situation. Canadians' access to water is also threatened by crumbling infrastructure and increasing attempts to privatize our public distribution systems.

How will establishing a human right to water help?

With a UN recognition of the human right to water, governments would be duty-bound to provide water to their peoples. It would establish legal groundwork for a fair and just distribution system, meaning that people would get the water they need to live at a reasonable cost. It would ensure that water would not become a commodity and could not be bought and sold under market conditions. Recognition of the right to water at the UN would make it much more difficult for multinational water corporations to sell water at unfair and inflated prices to people who need it, but can't afford it. It would give people living in water-stressed areas a tool to push their government for access to clean, safe water, and it would help safeguard water sources from pollution and industrial abuses by establishing clear links between water, nature and the sustainability of life on our planet.

Would Canada have to give its water to other countries?

Declaring a human right to water would not require Canada to send water – in the form of bulk exports – to the United States or to any other countries. Establishing a human right to water would only oblige Canada to provide safe, clean, accessible water to the people within its borders. United Nations (UN) rights conventions do not require

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one country to provide those rights to another country. Canada signed the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights but is under no obligation to provide housing, jobs, pensions or health care to everyone in the world – only to its own peoples. A human rights convention remains between a government and those living in the state and in no way affects a country's sovereign right to manage its own resources or to provide those resources to other countries.

What is Canada's position on the human right to water?

To this day, both the Conservative and the Liberal parties have spoken out and lobbied against the human right to water, falsely claiming it would require Canada to send bulk exports of water to other countries, including the United States. Support for the right to water has been steadily growing around the world in recent years, but Canada has emerged as one of its leading opponents and is now one of only a handful of countries to openly lobby against it. In the most recent vote on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation resolution, Canada abstained and was one of a handful of powerful countries to speak out against it.

How can a right to water be enforced?

While there is currently no specific enforcement mechanism, declaring a human right can be viewed as a tool that will give people leverage in the courts and through public policy, as well as in political and public efforts to push states to fulfill their obligations as outlined in the declaration.

In Canada's case, securing a human right to water can also help protect our resources from free trade agreements. Both the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the proposed Canada-European Union Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) treat Canada's water as a commodity to be bought and sold. Right now, our water is vulnerable to bulk exports under NAFTA and possibly under CETA. By declaring water a human right, the Canadian government will have stronger authority over the future of our water as sustainability and human rights could be tools to block the power of the trade agreements.

Why does the resolution include the "right to sanitation?"

The right to sanitation, which has been added to the resolution, is the entitlement of everyone to the safe collection, transport, disposal or reuse of human excreta and waste-

water for personal and domestic uses. Inadequate sanitation causes easily preventable diseases such as diarrhea, which kills at least 5,000 children globally each day.

What is the Council of Canadians doing to secure the human right to water?

The Council of Canadians and our National Chairperson Maude Barlow have been at the forefront of the quest for the human right to water for more than a decade. The Blue Planet Project (BPP) is an international civil society movement that was started by the Council of Canadians to protect the world's fresh water from the growing threats of trade and privatization. The BPP works with organizations and activists in both southern and northern countries, and is affiliated with international networks including Friends of the Earth International, the African Water Network, Red Vida (the Americas Network on the Right to Water), Reclaiming Public Water, and the People's Health Movement.

How can I take action?

People living in Canada need to demand our government to show leadership on water issues by recognizing this right and by taking an active role in dealing with the global water crisis. It is now up to Canada to follow through with the commitment made at the UN to the Human Right to Water and Sanitation. This will include addressing appalling access to clean, safe water for many Indigenous communities in our country.

Write to Prime Minister Stephen Harper today and affirm your support of the Human Right to Water and Sanitation.

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