

GLOBAL WATER CRISIS

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Voices of the South on Globalization is a monthly newsletter intended to inspire a meaningful North-South Dialogue by raising awareness for global interdependences and by offering a forum for voices from the South in the globalization debate. Each edition presents short analyses or commentaries from a Southern perspective on one particular issue of the globalization process.

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Water is a Human Right Now

In a historic and long-awaited decision, the United Nations General Assembly adopted on 28 July 2010 a resolution that recognized the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights. While the importance of food has been recognized by accepting it as a human right, the access to clean water had not officially been recognized as a human right.

When the UN Declaration of Human Rights was drawn up, water was a notable item left out of the list of human rights. Now the General Assembly has rectified this omission – apparently recognizing that there is almost nothing more important to human beings than water. We cannot live without water for more than three days or so. Some people have been reported to survive two months without food. Perhaps only air is more crucial than water for life.

The UNGA resolution was adopted by a vote of 122 countries in favour, none objecting and 42 abstaining. Introducing the resolution and urging for a "yes" vote, Bolivia's Ambassador, Pablo Solon, said: "I ask all delegations to bear in mind the fact that, according to the 2009 report of the World Health Organization and UNICEF entitled 'Diarrhoea: Why children are still dying and what can be done,' 24,000 children die in developing countries every day from preventable causes like Diarrhoea, contracted from unclean water. "That is one child death every three and a half seconds. One, two, three. . . . As my people say, "Now is the time."

Ambassador Solon added that lack of access to water killed more children than AIDS, malaria and measles combined, while the lack of sanitation affected 2.6 billion people or 40% of the global population.

The General Assembly resolution called on States and international organisations to provide financial resources, build capacity and transfer technology particularly to developing countries in scaling up efforts to provide clean, accessible and affordable drinking water and sanitation for all.

It expressed deep concern that 884 million people lack access to safe drinking water, and more than 2.6 billion lack proper sanitation and expressed alarm that 1.5 million children less than 5 years old die each year because of water and sanitation related diseases. It acknowledged that safe, clean drinking water and sanitation are integral to the realisation of all human rights.

It also recalled the commitment by the world's political leaders through the Millennium Development Goals to halve, by 2015, the proportion of people unable to reach or afford safe drinking water, and to halve the proportion of people without access to basic sanitation, as agreed in the Johannesburg Plan of Action.

The resolution then "recognises the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights." It is not surprising that Bolivia led the move at the General Assembly. The present government of Bolivian President Evo Morales came to power several years ago partly on the basis of a public protest against the privatisation of water services and public concerns over access to water. ☑

Ban Underlines Importance of Water as a Human Right

During an event at the MDG Summit, on 22 September, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon warned that although the world is on track to meet the goal of halving the proportion of people without access to safe water, hundreds of millions worldwide still live with an absence of clean water, perpetuating poverty. Water, he stressed, "is not only a basic necessity, it is a human right."

Since 1990, some 1.7 billion people have gained access to safe drinking water. Four regions – Northern Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern Asia and South-Eastern Asia – have already met the target. However, nearly 900 million still do not have access to clean water.

With 2.6 billion people not having access to basic sanitation services such as toilets, the sanitation target is likely to be missed. If the current trend continues, the number is expected to climb to 2.7 billion by 2015.

"Living in these conditions increases the likelihood of disease and death," Ban said at an event held at UN Headquarters titled 'Addressing the Global Water and Sanitation Challenge: The Key to the MDGs' He urged drastic changes in public health policies and sanitation infrastructure.

The water issue touches the lives of billions every day and the world needs a clear signal that water is an issue of the highest priority, said Maude Barlow, chair of the Council of Canadians and a senior advisor on water to the previous President of the UN General Assembly

"When the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights was written, no one could foresee a day when water would be a contested area," said Barlow, a passionate campaigner for what she calls "water justice".

"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 their parents had access to clean water and if adequate sanitation was available."

The situation 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%. This, said Barlow, is "a shocking prediction that foretells of terrible suffering."

UN Resolution on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation

The following resolution (A/RES/64/292) was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 28 July 2010.
The Human Right to Water and Sanitation

The General Assembly,

Recalling its resolutions..... (naming various resolutions on development, environment, water and sanitation)

Recalling also the Universal Declaration of Human Rights..... (and also naming various human rights covenants and conventions),

Recalling further all previous resolutions of the Human Rights Council on "human rights and access to safe drinking water and sanitation" ... (naming various resolutions),

Deeply concerned that approximately 884 million people lack access to safe drinking water and that more than 2.6 billion do not have access to basic sanitation, and alarmed that approximately 1.5 million children under 5 years of age die and 443 million school days are lost each year as a result of water- and sanitation-related diseases,

Acknowledging the importance of equitable, safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as an integral component of the realization of all human rights,

Reaffirming the responsibility of States for the promotion and protection of all human rights, which are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated, and must be treated globally, in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing and with the same emphasis,

Bearing in mind the commitment made by the international community to fully achieve the Millennium Development Goals, and stressing, in that context, the resolve of Heads of State and Government, as expressed in the United Nations Millennium Declaration, to halve, by 2015, the proportion of people unable to reach or afford safe drinking water, and to halve the proportion of people without access to basic sanitation, as agreed in the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development ("Johannesburg Plan of Implementation"),

1. Recognises the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights;

2. Calls upon States and international organizations to provide financial resources, capacity-building and technology transfer, through international assistance and cooperation, in particular to developing countries, in order to scale up efforts to provide safe, clean, accessible and affordable drinking water and sanitation for all;

3. Welcomes the decision by the Human Rights Council to request that the independent expert on the issue of human rights obligations related to access to safe drinking water and sanitation present an annual report to the General Assembly, and encourages her to continue working on all aspects of her mandate and, in consultation with all relevant United Nations agencies, funds, and programmes, to include in her report to the Assembly, at its sixty-sixth session, the principal challenges related to the realization of the human right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation and their impact on the achievement of Millennium Development Goals. ☑

Make Global Water Crisis a Top Priority Issue

While climate change has captured the headlines, many countries are running out of freshwater supplies, threatening human health and causing conflicts between nations. Water should be at the top of the global and national agendas, writes Martin Khor, director of South Centre, an intergovernmental think tank of developing countries.

In recent years, climate change seems to have elbowed out other environmental issues to become the No. 1 global problem. But the alarming problems of water -- increasing scarcity, lack of access to drinking water and sanitation, pollution, flooding -- are equally important and an even more immediate threat.

On July 28, the UN General Assembly in a historic decision recognized the right to water and sanitation as a human right. This is a fitting recognition of the crucial importance of water to the survival of individuals and the basis for development of nations and indeed the world.

The extensive floods in Pakistan is also a current reminder of two things: the devastating impact of climate change on rainfall and the flow of water quantities; and the importance of properly managing water drainage, especially in the major rivers and waterways.

The increasing shortage of water in many countries has become a crisis. A decade ago, it was predicted that a third of the world's population would be facing water scarcity by 2025. But this threshold has already been reached. Two billion people live in countries that are water-stressed and by 2025, two-thirds of the world population may suffer water stress, unless current trends alter.

Even more dramatic, it is predicted that wars will be fought over water this century, just as wars were and are still being fought over control of oil these past decades.

"The global population tripled in the 20th century but water consumption went up sevenfold," noted Maudhe Barlow of the Council of Canadians and an expert on the global water crisis in her book *Blue Covenant*. "By 2050, after we add another 3 billion to the population, humans will need an 80% increase in water supplies just to feed ourselves. No one knows where this water is going to come from."

There is a rapidly growing demand for freshwater but its supply is limited and decreasing. Water supply is affected by the loss of watersheds due to deforestation and soil erosion in hills and mountains. There is also a severe depletion of valuable groundwater resources as water is taken up for agriculture and industry, and is being dug from deeper and deeper sources.

Mining of groundwater has caused the water-table to drop in parts of many countries including India and China, West Asia, Russia and the United States. Agriculture uses 70% of water because industrial agriculture requires large amounts of water. It takes 3 cubic metres of water to produce a kilo of cereals, and 15 cubic metres of water to produce a kilo of beef because of the grain fed to the cows.

A lot of surface water is also polluted and thus not available for human use, or if it is used, the polluted water causes health problems. Five million people die from water-borne diseases annually.

Water supplies are also being affected by climate change. Global warming is causing an accelerated melting of the glaciers and there will be less glaciers in the future. For example, the Himalayan glaciers feed many of the great rivers in India, China and Southeast Asia, "The full scale glacier shrinkage in the plateau regions will eventually lead to an ecological catastrophe," according to Yao Tandong of the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

The acute water problems facing Yemen are described in the London-based *Guardian* on February 27, 2010. The country's capital Sana'a is predicted to run out of water in 2017 as four times as much water is taken out of its river basin as falls into it each year. Of the country's 21 main water aquifers, 19 are no longer being replenished after a drought and increased demand. The water situation is so serious the government has considered moving the capital as well as desalinating coastal seawater and pumping it 2,000 metres uphill to Sana'a.

CONFLICT OVER WATER SUPPLIES

Water scarcity has also become a reason for conflict. This is especially when a source of water such as a major river serves more than one country. The country or countries that have the upper reaches of the river can affect the volume of water flowing into the countries at the lower parts of the river.

In Africa, about 50 rivers are each shared by two or more countries. According to an issue of *Population Reports*, access to water from the Nile, Zambezi, Niger, and Volta river basins in particular has the potential to ignite conflicts.

It also describes how the Aral Sea Basin in Central Asia is beset by international conflicts over water among Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan which all depend for their survival on the waters of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers.

The Middle East has been running out of water. In that situation the grounds for conflict have increased. In his recent book *Water*, Steven Solomon describes the growing tension over the sharing of water resources of the Nile especially between Egypt and Ethiopia.

In the Jordan River basin, writes Solomon, "in one of the world's political hot spots, Israelis, Palestinians, Jordanians and Syrians contest to control and divide the scarce resources of a region that long ago ran out of enough freshwater for everyone." **Continued on page 6** ➔

Greener Water Laws Will Save Lives and Environment

The lack of safe drinking water and basic sanitation is killing year in and year out 1.8 million children under the age of five. They die from diarrheal diseases such as cholera, typhoid, and dysentery. In fact, a new report warns that if the international community fails to take action to improve freshwater supplies for drinking, sanitation, and hygiene purposes, as many as 135 million preventable deaths could occur by 2020.

According to the report, launched on September 7 at World Water Week in Stockholm by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the unsustainable use of freshwater is a major contributor to biodiversity loss -- and the effects are being felt in rivers, lakes and wetlands across the world.

In North America, for example, around 27 percent of continental freshwater fauna populations are now threatened with extinction as a result of depleted and contaminated freshwater resources. In Croatia in Europe over a third of all freshwater fish species are currently under threat.

Competition is increasing between the rapidly growing human population -- which needs water for drinking, sanitation, food production and economic development -- and species and ecosystems, which rely on water to sustain their existence.

The key challenge now facing governments across the world is how to meet the growing water needs of human society, while maintaining freshwater ecosystems and supporting environmental sustainability.

In order to face the challenge, governments and law-makers need to integrate environmental concerns into water-use legislation to avert an impending global water crisis, says the UNEP report titled 'The Greening of Water Law: Managing Freshwater Resources for People and the Environment'.

But with more communities than ever before facing both human and environmental water crises, how can changes to the law help to tackle the problem?

"Simply put, it's the law that provides the structure through which new policies can be implemented", says Professor Gabriel Eckstein, lead author of the report. "Achieving a better balance between human and environmental water needs will require significant changes in legislation -- and you need legal tools to achieve this."

The report cites several examples of green water laws that have already been introduced across the world. In New South Wales in Australia, the State's Water Management Act dictates that in the event of a severe water shortage, freshwater will be allocated first to meet basic domestic and municipal needs, then in response to the needs of the environment, and thereafter for all other purposes.

Similarly, in Paraguay, the Water Resources Act ranks the water needs of aquatic ecosystems as second only to humans and ahead of agriculture, power generation and industry.

"These laws recognise the immense value of freshwater resources", says Eckstein. "Take wetlands for example -- for humans to recreate their natural benefits, we would have to

build massive water treatment plants at huge cost. Protecting these resources makes economic sense."

Defending freshwater resources in national and internal law can bring economic gains. For example, the world's wetlands have been calculated to provide as much as US\$15 trillion in ecosystem services. This includes benefits such as water purification and detoxification through their ability to extract and absorb pollutants from contaminated waters.

Freshwater resources are also among the 11 sectors being addressed under UNEP's Green Economy Initiative. The initiative is designed to assist governments in 'greening' their economies by refocusing policies and spending towards clean technologies, renewable energies, water services, waste management and other sustainable strategies.

Managing freshwater resources also forms a central pillar of The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) project, hosted by UNEP. TEEB aims to develop guidance for policy makers at international, regional and local levels in order to promote sustainable development and better conservation of ecosystems and biodiversity.

Although over two thirds of the Earth is covered in water, only 2.5 percent of this is fresh water. Most is stored deep underground or in glaciers, meaning that only 1 percent of the world's fresh water is available for human use.

The UNEP report warns that this limited natural resource is under greater strain than ever before. Regional and national governments must therefore be encouraged to seek a more balanced approach to water use -- with regard to both environmental and human needs.

"The benefits of incorporating environmental considerations into greening water law at the national level can be manifold and range from economic advantages and social and health benefits, to the more obvious environmental benefits," says the report.

Moreover, the ability to green water laws is an indispensable tool in realizing the objectives and in meeting the obligations of international agreements and overarching policy agendas such as those expressed in the Millennium Development Goals and in multilateral environmental agreements.

The report points out that freshwater ecosystems and their services have been experiencing rapid and tremendous degradation and loss in the past 50 years, destroyed by overuse, pollution and other human activities. "This being said, there is mounting evidence that a clean and healthy aquatic environment is advantageous for people and nations in all facets of life, including in economic terms." --IDN-InDepthNews ☑

The Water Pollution Challenge is Tackable

Whether rich or poor, people in every corner of the world are confronted with the pressing challenge of water pollution. Some two million tonnes of human waste are disposed of in watercourses everyday. Seventy percent of industrial wastes in developing countries are dumped untreated into waters where they pollute the usable water supply.

The complexity of the challenge of water pollution lies in the many different forms that pollution can take. These are the range of pollution sources, and the varying scales -- local, regional or global -- at which pollution can develop.

Lack of monitoring and enforcement also makes it difficult for countries and regions to understand and deal with this challenge. Lest it should appear that there is no hope, the paper adds: As with most challenges, however, opportunities exist that can reverse the water degradation trend, contribute to economic growth and improve human and environmental health.

One way to prevent and mitigate pollution is the 'Polluter Pays Principle', which asks the polluter to pay for the pollution mitigation, thereby transferring the costs to those that are responsible, and in turn stimulating new innovative solutions. Another method is 'Name and Shame', where those that are found to be polluting water systems are publically singled out, with the aim to deter future recurrences.

The 2010 World Water Week (WWW) from September 5 to 11 in Stockholm explored: What other strategies exist to prevent and mitigate pollution? What institutional obstacles exist that may inhibit the implementation of pollution policies? On the anvil was also a role for media and the general public in facilitating decisions at all levels of government and society.

The basic challenge, according to the thematic paper posted on the web, lies in the fact that demographic change and economic growth contribute to water being increasingly withdrawn, used, reused, treated, and disposed of. Urbanisation, agriculture, industry and climate change exert mounting pressure on both the quantity and quality of water resources.

The reason: many human activities that produce a good also generate pollutants. In fact, every human may be seen as a source of pollutants. These pollutants often find their way into sinks such as reservoirs, wetlands and aquifers.

Within the context of global changes, WWW highlighted the more sobering aspects of the challenge: the pollution-causing activities, the prevalent and emerging pollutants, and the scale and trends of the impacts on human and environmental health. This helped to clarify the current status and convey the urgency, magnitude and pervasiveness of the water quality problem.

The WWW will also investigate how some countries and regions have responded to water quality degradation in the past. This is expected to shed light on how to circumvent historical trends as the world moves forward. "Learning from the association between development and water quality degradation in the past can help to prevent patterns from re-occurring

as countries develop. By learning from what has worked and not worked, we can avoid a business-as-usual approach that would delay even further the recovery of ecosystems and lead potentially to irreversible shifts," argues the paper.

The Week also provided an opportunity to examine promising examples, case studies and leading-edge technologies that are in use around the world. This drew attention to effective response measures related to pollution prevention, wise resource use and sound abatement practices, thus allowing for an analysis of the alternatives to improve the current and future water quality problems.

An important point in confronting the challenge of water pollution is that to realize that water is a solvent and transport mechanism continuously moving through the landscape. Human modifications of water systems and changes in land use have significant effects on surface and groundwater quality, which in turn has negative effects on human and ecosystem health.

In the absence of this awareness, there is often a disconnect for people that pollute and the effects of that pollution on people and ecosystems downstream or in other parts of shared lakes and aquifers. "The flow perspective can therefore shed light on the creeping and often invisible nature of water pollution," states the paper.

It is also vital to realize that accumulation of pollutants over time in the natural sinks in the landscape can have considerable long term impacts on human and ecosystem health. Groundwater systems are especially vulnerable to pollution, as they are often difficult and costly to remediate. Some pollutants can occur in high concentrations even though the water can appear clean and safe.

Intensified resource use in all sectors is generally associated with increased loads of nutrients, sediments, chemicals, pathogens and metals. Tracing the pathways of these pollutants, from rain to drain, can in fact help to shed light on many issues, including how pollution can contribute to the undermining of ecosystem resilience. Weakened resilience diminishes the capacity of ecosystems to cope, leading to tipping points and regime shifts. Sometimes these shifts are irreversible and the goods and services that humans derived from the ecosystems are lost.

According to the paper, for analytical reasons and effective policy-making, it is useful to distinguish between point and non-point sources of pollution. Point sources include pipelines, channels and drains from identifiable locations such as an industrial plant or landfill. Non-point or diffuse sources of pollution arise from extensive land areas and are mobilised by precipitation and thus closely related to the hydrological cycle. ☑

Water Security at Extreme Risk in Africa and Asia

Clean, fresh water supply, which is fundamental to life and health -- regardless of nationality, age, gender, profession or status -- is at "extreme risk" in four African countries: Somalia, Mauritania, Sudan and Niger.

The situation in Iraq, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Egypt, Turkmenistan and Syria is equally precarious, says a new report emerging from the Water Security Risk Index of 165 countries around the world.

Compiled by the British-based risk consultancy Maplecroft, the report warns that global warming and growing population will stress clean, fresh water supplies in coming decades. This will adversely affect a wide range of activities from agriculture to industry.

"Climate change and increasing demands from population growth will cause a worsening of water stress over the coming decades," says Dr Anna Moss, environmental analyst at Maplecroft. "Conflict is likely to spread and intensify as a result of a lack of water security and for the countries that are heavily reliant upon external supplies the issue of water may become critical."

The report points out that Somalia has the least access to improved drinking water, with only 30 percent of the country having reliable supplies; Mauritania is nearly 97 percent dependant on external water supplies, while only 26 percent of Sudanese have access to improved sanitation.

Fourth in the index, Niger, is 90 percent reliant on external water supplies and is in the midst of a humanitarian crisis partly caused by drought last year, which contributed to the failure of crops. The country also has the worst rating for access to improved sanitation with only 9 percent accessibility for the population.

The report draws attention to the fact that countries in the extreme risk category, including the emerging economies of Pakistan, Egypt and Uzbekistan, are already experiencing internal and cross-border tensions due to limited water resources. Furthermore, as the global climate changes, water stress is predicted to become more acute in these regions and has the potential to threaten stability.

A case in point is Pakistan's long-running dispute over Kashmir with India, which is in part fuelled by competition for critical water resources that are needed to maintain the growth of industry and investment for both countries. Egypt, which is dependent on water from the Blue Nile, is currently threatening legal action over the construction of the Gibe III dam in Ethiopia, which will further jeopardize its limited supplies.

In Uzbekistan, where an estimated 87 percent of the population has access to good quality drinking water, tensions are rising with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan due to hydro-electric projects on the rivers that flow into the country. The water security risk index uses seven indicators to measure the four key areas surrounding the issue. These include: access to improved drinking water and sanitation; the availability of renewable water and the reliance on external supplies; the relationship between available water and supply demands; and the water dependency of each country's economy. ☑

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There can also be similar competition for water within a country, for example between states that share the same river.

According to Population Reports, in the western U.S., farmers who want more irrigation water face off against urban areas that demand more water for households and other municipal uses.

In India, Karnataka state was in a water dispute with Andhra Pradesh over the height of a dam on the Krishna River, which could affect the amount of water available for use by both states.

PRIVATE VS. PUBLIC CONTROL OVER WATER SYSTEMS

Another issue is the fight over the systems for owning and distributing the scarce water resources. In her book, Maudhe Barlow describes the recent policies to privatise water, which until recently was under direct control of government authorities.

Privatisation was first carried out in Western countries and then spread to developing countries through World Bank loans and projects.

This has led to adverse effects on people's access to water, according to Barlow, who also documents the fight by citizen groups in many countries to make water a public good, and to make access to water a human right.

WATER AS A TOP PRIORITY ISSUE

All the above issues should be taken with the same seriousness as climate change, because water is about the most important item needed by everyone, and its scarcity affects both human health and geo-politics.

As Solomon puts it: "An explosive new political fault line is erupting across the global landscape between the water Haves and water Have Nots.... Simply, water is surpassing oil itself as the world's scarcest critical resource.

"Just as oil conflicts were central to the 20th century history, the struggle over freshwater is set to shape a new turning point in the world order and the destiny of civilization." Thus, water must be recognized as a crisis issue and solutions to the crisis should be at the top of the global and national agendas.

It is thus timely that the UN General Assembly, the world's top policy forum, has adopted the resolution that the right to water and sanitation is a human right. Operationalising this right so that all human beings have access to water, and that all countries have the capacity to obtain, manage and wisely use water resources, is an imperative.

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