

HISTORIC EXPANSION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

The UN declares the right to clean drinking water and sanitation



After more than a decade of grassroots organizing and lobbying, the global water justice movement achieved a significant victory when the United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to affirm “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.”

The resolution—put forward by Bolivia and co-sponsored by 35 countries—passed overwhelmingly with 122 states voting in favor and 41 abstaining.

It is a non-binding statement, meaning that no nation will be forced to follow it, but nonetheless marks a significant advance for human and environmental rights. The decision by the UN General Assembly supports current organizing effort for a future resolution recognizing water as a common resource, to be creatively managed for the needs of future generations – of all species.

Embarrassed to go on record against the right to a life-giving resource, not one country voted against it.

“We’re absolutely thrilled,” said Maude Barlow, former senior advisor on water to the president of the UN General Assembly and current national chairwoman of the Council of Canadians and the Washington, D.C.-based Food and Water Watch.

“This is a historic day. I think every now and then, the human species advances somewhat in our evolution, and today was one of those advances.”

The Universal Declaration on Human Rights, approved in 1948, did not specifically recognize a right to water. But in recent decades, worsening water scarcity and contamination, aggravated by global climate change made a resolution on water rights more urgent.

“It was a great honor to be present as the UN General Assembly took this historic step forward in the struggle for a just world,” said Barlow.

“It is sad however, that Canada chose not to participate in this important moment in history.” The United States and the UK also abstained in the vote.

Some country delegations said they abstained because they did not get instructions from their capitals in time to confirm their positions. Others said they were afraid of the resolution’s implications for water they share with other nations, known as trans boundary water. (Even though it was non-binding.)

Next month, a UN meeting will be held to review progress on the organization’s Millennium Development Goals, one of which is to reduce by half the number of people without sanitation. “It would have looked very bad indeed at that meeting for countries to have voted against the right to sanitation,” said Anil Naidoo, coordinator of the Blue Planet Project and an On the Commons Fellow.

Pressures to weaken the resolution were considerable. One proposal was to insert the word “access” to water and sanitation so that the resolution would read, “right to access to water and sanitation”. For UN delegates, this would mean their governments need only guarantee access, not the water itself. It would be adequate in that case to merely assure water for purchase, rather than guaranteeing that it is a fundamental right, even for those who can’t afford it.

That the resolution did not stop at “access” makes it more powerful. “It means governments have to provide the water even if people cannot pay for it . . . it’s an important distinction,” Barlow said.

The final resolution “calls upon States and international organizations to provide financial resources, capacity-building and technology transfer, through international assistance and co-operation, in particular to developing countries, in order to scale up efforts to provide safe, clean, accessible and affordable drinking water and sanitation for all.”

As with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the implementation of the resolution will likely be uneven and won through local advocacy campaigns. “I thank all of you who stepped forward and took action to support recognition of the human right to water and sanitation,” Naidoo wrote to supporters of the resolution after the vote. “But the vote is not the end of anything. It was never a goal in itself, it was more about what it will allow us to do after this in our campaigns, advocacy, and struggle. Our work is, in fact just beginning.”

Grassroots organizations working to ensure that communities have the knowledge, money, and legal backing to sustainably manage their water resources will find their cause strengthened by the new resolution.

Although winning the right to water does not guarantee that the globe's ecosystems also receive their fair share of water, Naidoo feels that "this resolution will be an important step in a radical rethinking of how our water commons around the globe are managed."

Naidoo offered special thanks to Bolivia's ambassador Pablo Solon. Bolivia has played a leadership role in securing the right to water and sanitation, and is building support for a similar UN resolution on the rights of Mother Earth, which would seek, among other goals, to ensure the health of the world's watersheds.

For now, though, the global water justice movement has achieved an impressive victory. As Carlos Beas of UCIZONI , an organization of indigenous communities working on food sovereignty and resource rights defense in the isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexico said, "It's approved. And just in time. Now we must put it into practice."

Daniel Moss is coordinator of Our Water Commons , a project of On the Commons to raise awareness about the world's water as a commons.

Source: <http://www.onthecommons.org/historic-expansion-human-rights>