

Water For Life – Streams of Justice

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“Water is life and because we have no water life is miserable” (Kenya)

All life springs from water. Water is unique. It cannot be substituted for. Water symbolizes the sacred and spiritual in all religions and many cultures. Access to water is essential for life, and therefore a basic right of all living beings.

The nations of the world gathered at the Millennium Summit undertook, by 2015, to reduce by half the number of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water.

‘In order to save the more than 3 million people who die each year from water-related diseases, we must improve water and sanitation services, and access to them, by finding new money for water development and management’ (UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, 29/05/02)

The water-poverty connection

- 40 percent of the world’s population has no access to safe drinking water.
- 80 percent of disease in two-thirds of the world is related to poor drinking water and sanitation. During the 10 days of the World Summit more than 60,000 children in the developing world will contract diseases linked to unclean drinking water and inadequate sanitation.
- One-third of the world’s households must use water sources outside the home. From 1970-2000 in East African cities water use per capita was almost halved. At the same time each trip to collect water rose from an average 9 to 21 minutes. Water poverty targets women and girls more than men and boys.
- The world is running out of water. Half the world’s poorest countries will face moderate to severe water shortages by the year 2025. This flies in the face of the Millennium Development Goals.

Factors affecting the water crisis

It is established that:

- Around the world there is a cumulative pollution of aquifers and water sources by agricultural, industrial and mining waste.
- Reduction in water-retention capacity of the earth’s soil is due to 80% of the forests of the world being destroyed.
- Poor management of water resources has led to degradation of the environment and loss of natural resources on which people in rural and remote areas depend for livelihood.
- Excessive consumption in the North, and wasteful overuse, especially by agribusiness, has significantly depleted the world’s water resources. One toilet flush uses as much water as the average person in a developing country uses for a whole day’s drinking, cooking, washing and cleaning!
- Effects of global warming, such as rising sea levels and altered seasonal patterns, are having a debilitating impact on freshwater resources.

Access – a fundamental issue

Privatisation of water has become an issue of concern in many developing countries. If water is reduced to a commodity with a price tag, access to a primary need by those who cannot pay is threatened.

When Governments abdicate their responsibility to provide such basic services as water, private suppliers can engage in unregulated competition. *“Water is the last infrastructure frontier for private investors.”* (1) The value of the global market for water and sanitation has been estimated as a US\$405 billion a year industry, which is 40% of the size of the oil sector.

The World Bank reckons that up to US\$870 billion will be needed over 10 years to improve access to safe water and sanitation in developing countries. It sees water privatisation as the answer. So, in many countries World Bank/IMF structural adjustment policies demand that provision of water be privatised in the interests of economic viability and efficiency.

As most cases of privatisation show, however, the economic viability of the utility companies in question has resulted not from improved operations, but from price increases made possible by virtual monopoly control and weak government regulations.

As a result, people's access to water depends on their purchasing power. Even the argument of free trade in this instance, does not "hold water". Free trade implies the capacity for choice. When it comes to water, we do not have any choice.

If privatising water is seen as the main avenue for access to safe water and sanitation, the price factor may well negate the goal. There is no guarantee that corporations will subjugate their for-profit interests to people's need for access to clean and affordable water.

Equitable allocation of water – essential for social and environmental justice

The Ecumenical community advocates that:

- access to water be recognised as a human right, linked to the right to life;
- essential freshwater be designated a Global Public Good (GPG) which should not be reduced to a market-force commodity;
- the Summit commit to a global action plan to achieve access for all to clean drinking water and sanitation by 2015;
- water management plans be integrated into national strategies for poverty reduction and sustainable development by 2005;

- women's participation at all levels in decisions regarding the control, management and distribution of water be recognised as a matter of crucial importance to poverty eradication;

- an international monitoring body be established to track the trade of water in relation to Indigenous Peoples; Indigenous traditions set rules for water use, domestic consumption and extracting resources from the water. These function as 'tariffs and quotas' to regulate water exploitation, and must be respected and taken into consideration in future planning.

- water councils be set up at all levels that are independent, democratic and participatory to provide an integrated strategy for managing and protecting all freshwater systems;

- clear limits be put on private ownership and control of water resources. All public/ private partnerships in the delivery of water and sanitation must be monitored to ensure that in their policies are pro-people.

- Member States commit to concrete targets and the allocation of funds so that there is real hope of meeting the time-line to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

In Conclusion....

The UN considers the increasing scarcity of available freshwater as a factor critical to world peace and security. The Ecumenical Team urges the Member States to create strategies to satisfy the water needs of all, in order to prevent further water-related conflicts, both within countries and across borders. Water access and the promotion of peace are inseparable.

"Let all you who thirst, come to the water! Though you have no money come, receive grain and eat" (Isaiah 55:1)

(1) John Bastin, European Bank for Reconstruction & Development.

The Ecumenical Team is coordinated by the World Council of Churches in collaboration with the Sisters of Mercy. It includes members of several Christian denominations and other faith-based organisations and networks, and of other collaborating partners. For further information contact: +1-212-867-5890 or +41-22-791-6111; Johannesburg during WSSD: 011-804-3777.