

Water for Health Declared a Human Right

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GENEVA, Switzerland, December, 2002 (ENS) - Safe and secure drinking water is a human right, a United Nations committee has declared formally for the first time. “Water should be treated as a social and cultural good, and not primarily as an economic commodity,” the committee said, siding with those who object to the privatization of water supplies.

The United Nations Committee on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights took the unprecedented step of agreeing on a General Comment on water as a human right, saying, “Water is fundamental for life and health. The human right to water is indispensable for leading a healthy life in human dignity. It is a pre-requisite to the realization of all other human rights.”

A General Comment is an interpretation of the provisions of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This one was signed on November 27 as the Committee wound up its three week autumn session.

Although the Covenant does not expressly refer to the word “water,” the committee determined that the right to water is “clearly implicit” in the rights contained in two sections of the Covenant.

The General Comment means that the 145 countries which have ratified the Covenant “have a constant and continuing duty” to progressively ensure that everyone has access to safe and secure drinking water and sanitation facilities – equitably and without discrimination.

“Countries will be required to ‘respect, protect and fulfil’ individuals’ rights to safe drinking water and sanitation,” said World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, quoting from the General Comment.

The General Comment specifically recognizes that water, like health, is an essential element for achieving other human rights, such as the rights to adequate food and nutrition, housing and education.

“This is a major boost in efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals of halving the number of people without access to water and sanitation by 2015 - two pre-requisites for health,” Dr. Brundtland said.

An estimated 1.1 billion of the world’s people, roughly one in six, do not have access to clean drinking water, according to WHO figures. Sanitation progress has also been slow, and some 2.4 billion people, about one in every 2.5 individuals, still do not have access to a safe latrine.

Inadequate water and sanitation is “a major cause of poverty and the growing disparity between rich and poor,” WHO said.

“The fact that water is now regarded as a basic human right will give all members of the Global Alliance an effective tool to make a real difference at country level,” said Dr. Brundtland, a physician and former Norwegian prime minister.

The General Comment provides a tool for civil society to hold governments accountable for ensuring equitable access to water. It is intended to focus attention and activities on the poor and vulnerable, the committee says.

The General Comment states, “The human right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, affordable, physically accessible, safe and acceptable water for personal and domestic uses.”

“While those uses vary between cultures, an adequate amount of safe water is necessary to prevent death from dehydration, to reduce the risk of water related disease and to provide for consumption, cooking, personal and domestic hygienic requirements,” the text states.

“The right to water contains both freedom and entitlements,” the committee states in its Comment. “The freedoms include the right to maintain access to existing water supplies necessary for the right to water; and the right to be free from interference, such as the right to be free from arbitrary disconnections or contamination of water supplies.” Sufficient water should be obtained in a sustainable manner, the committee said, to ensure that “the right can be realized for present and future generations.”

The formal statement of water and sanitation as a human right is intended as a framework to assist governments in establishing effective policies and strategies that yield “real benefits for health and society,” WHO said.

The world health agency associates 3.4 million deaths each year with inadequate water and sanitation. Diseases such as malaria, cholera, dysentery, schistosomiasis, infectious hepatitis and diarrhoea are the killers.

Dr. Brundtland estimates that one third of the global burden of disease, in all age groups, can be attributed to environmental risk factors. Over 40 percent of this burden falls on children under five years of age, even though they make up only about 10 percent of the world’s population. The director-general calls this area “an urgent priority for WHO’s work.”