

# ACCESS TO WATER IS NOT

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On 13 September 2004, at the World Urban Forum in Barcelona, Green Cross International announced the launch of a global campaign for the Right to Water.

For many years issues of vital importance to mankind's future have become, and remain, hostage to political games, the selfish interests of multi-national corporations and the inability of the international community to translate its plans into action.

In spite of numerous statements, proclamations and declarations made by various institutions, including the UN Millennium Declaration, words have failed to produce the much-needed water... For the 1.1 billion people who cannot reach or afford safe drinking water, for the 2.4 billion who lack access to basic sanitation this is an everyday reality.

These figures are so widely known and so extensively used that people start perceiving them as statistics. We should not fail to see human faces behind the ever increasing figures.

The UN Millennium Development Goals set the target of halving the number of people without access to water services by 2015. There is a danger that it will not be met. At the same time, according to reliable estimations, if the governments of the developed world were to allocate US \$20 per capita towards fighting the water crisis, it would take only 10 years to resolve it. \$20 is the price of 20 bottles of mineral water or 20 cups of coffee per year! In a recent report the UN World Health Organization estimated that meeting the UN Millennium Development Goals on sanitation would produce

economic returns of US \$3 to \$34 for every \$1 invested. Somehow we are unable to find the funds to bring water services to the world's poor and suffering, but it was easy to raise \$70 billion in a fortnight to fight the war in Iraq! This is scandalous and we all share the responsibility for it.

Green Cross urges the international community to take the initiative, to assume responsibility and to play their part in the great human mission enshrined in the Millennium Development Goals. People in villages, cities and towns, so often the instigators of change, innovation and solidarity, are absolutely central to this mission. Governments – including local governments – must lead by example. Hence the campaign for the Right to Water.

## INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR THE RIGHT TO WATER

The ultimate goal of the campaign is to help resolve the problem of water access for the millions of people who do not have it. Those without access to water are inherently the poorest and most deprived people on the planet. They are often without a voice, and without the means to assert their rights. We must give them a voice, give them their humanity, and honour our Millennium promises to them.

Meeting the water goals would be an example of how it is possible to make a difference – to make things better for everyone, and for the environment. The alternative – that in 2020, half the countries of the world live with severe water problems, and one third of the world's population is without basic sanitation and practically without water – is too awful to even contemplate.

We must aim for universal access to water and basic sanitation – anything less is a violation of our civilization, our universal human rights, and our morality.

**WATER IS NOT A PRIVILEGE, IT IS A RIGHT!** This is the slogan we have chosen for the campaign and I am sure that nobody in his right mind would deny the essence of it. And yet, the situation is far from simple.

It is incomprehensible that governments would choose, at the 3rd World Water Forum in Kyoto, to ignore or diminish the advice of 12,000 water specialists gathered together to identify common sense solutions to water problems. Instead it is "business as usual" as massive infrastructure continues to be regarded as the sole solution to the world's water crisis. In particular, the Ministerial Declaration did not commit governments to review dam development projects, nor did it ask for immediate ratification of the UN Convention on the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses by all member states, as a first step towards the negotiation of a Global Water Convention.

These were among the official recommendations of Green Cross International, as was the request to institute international support for the creation of a Water Cooperation Facility, to work with basin authorities, governments and stakeholders to resolve intractable water disagreements.

# A PRIVILEGE, IT'S A RIGHT

There are many disputes within the water sector: about how much it will cost to provide water and sanitation to those in need (compare the estimates of the Camdessus Report to those made by the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC), WaterAid and others); about the role of the private sector and the issue of cost-recovery; about the appropriate techniques to be applied and the scale at which projects should be designed and implemented; and, particularly relevant after the Cancun WTO Ministerial, the debate about GATS.

From a practical point of view it is the lack of suitable legal framework for resolving international water resource disputes that presents such a huge stumbling block to the solution of the global water crisis.

Providing essential services such as energy, water, and sanitation usually falls under the responsibility and the competence of local and regional governments. Without rules and regulations formulated and guaranteed by national governments and supported by international backing, it is impossible for many local governments in developing countries, especially in their larger cities, to ensure these basic services to everyone.

Supporting the ongoing work of United Nations institutions, like the UN-HABITAT, which promote the adoption of a universal declaration on access to essential services, Green Cross and its partners believe that an urgent and radical effort must be made towards international regulation of water supply and sanitation. One could wonder how it is possible that such an important component of an individual's life is not guaranteed by international law. Surprising as it may be, it is not.

In 1948, when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drawn up, it seemed so obvious to its authors that all people would have access to safe water that the provision of this right was neglected throughout the elaboration of international human rights law. It has been mentioned, more or less explicitly, in a number of international legal documents: the Mar del Plata Action Plan (1977); the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (1979); the Convention on the Right of the Child (1989); the Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development (1992); as well as in more and more national legislature.

However, an international document guaranteeing that everyone has a right to safe and affordable water, which would be binding for national governments and that, most importantly, would provide a schematic for the implementation of this right, does not exist. In spite of this being a critical situation, governments, with few exceptions, are reluctant to open complicated and time-consuming negotiations for a new international law.

An important step in the right direction was made in November 2002, when the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) recognized the right to water as a fundamental human right. This should, in theory, commit the 145 states that have ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to gradually ensure fair and non-discriminatory access to safe drinking water. Unfortunately however, the status of the interpretation by CESCR does not confer a legally binding governmental obligation.



Green Cross and its partners are proposing the negotiation and adoption of a Global Treaty on the Right to Water, which, when ratified by the member states of the United Nations, will give all people a tool through which to assert their right to safe water and sanitation and would oblige national governments to make sure that this right is respected. The rights-based approach to the management of water resources will open the road to access to water for all.

The fundamental principles of this Treaty have been discussed over the past four years, and were agreed to by more than 1100 representatives of one hundred non-governmental organizations from around

the world during the Water for Life Dialogue, hosted by the Universal Forum of Cultures in Barcelona, in June 2004.

In order to recognize the importance of this issue so that governments acquiesce to a new international treaty, their respective electorates must give them clear indications and sufficient pressure. To realize this, a world-wide public awareness campaign is necessary.

This is why Green Cross International, together with other international, national and local organizations, has launched an international public campaign to convince national governments to start the negotiation of this Treaty. The campaign, which was launched in Barcelona last September, is expected to be conducted over the next three years and to be concluded in 2008 in another Spanish city, Saragossa, at the 2008 World Water Exhibition. Full information and regular updates on the campaign may be found at [www.watertreaty.org](http://www.watertreaty.org), where you can also find a petition for the Right to Water, which I strongly encourage you to sign.

I encourage and invite all readers of The Optimist to become Ambassadors for this global citizens' initiative in your countries, your communities, and your institutions. The Right to Water is our common cause and in order for it to succeed, we need every voice to make itself heard.