

Creating universal access to clean water and sanitation is about democracy and human rights

Goal 6: “Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”

Summary

In ‘ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all’, goal 6 is not merely a question of technical accessibility but also about democracy and realising the human right to water. The UN General Assembly and UN Human Rights Council made resolutions in 2010 establishing access to water as a human right. Dominant international trends, however, treat water as a commodity rather than a human right or public good. This is a major impediment to achieving goal 6, and there needs to be critical examination of water commodification in the developing world.

Rethinking water as a right rather than a commodity

Access to safe water and sanitation continue to be of major concern worldwide despite considerable advancements made by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

- Based on water quality and safety alone we are still far from meeting the MDG target for water, including halving the world’s population without sanitation by 2015.
- Even if the MDG targets were met at least 0.7 billion people would still lack access to water and 1.73 billion people would lack access to some form of sanitation after 2015.
- While people in developing countries may have access to ‘improved’ water sources, they may not necessarily have ‘safe water’ (e.g., according to the 2014 MDGs Report) [1]. The challenge of goal 6, therefore, is massive.

Commodification of water resources stands in the way of the human right to water because it puts the control of those resources in the hands of private companies and wealthy individuals. Currently, dozens of countries believe these services should be commodified, and so do not support this right. However, the majority of the water on the planet remains un-commodified [2]. For water resources that have not been commodified, there is a massive opportunity for countries to put in place policies for ensuring people’s access to them – substantially improving their quality of life – particularly in the developing world.

Recommendations for attaining goal 6:

- The causes of failure to meet targets on adequate access to water and sanitation are **multidimensional**, involving natural, social, and individual processes and factors, and require **systemic solutions** drawing on interdisciplinary expertise and inter-sector collaboration in policymaking and implementation.
- Governments, international financial institutions, aid agencies, and other relevant actors **must abandon their support for water commodification and privatisation**. Policies of water commodification that have prevailed for the last three decades failed to contribute towards the MDGs and have created widespread social conflicts.
- The water sector must be subject to democratic control that **democratises water politics and management**. This requires putting in place effective legal and administrative mechanisms for meaningful citizen involvement.
- Support the development of public-public and public-community partnerships to make universal access to water and sanitation **a public good and a human right in practice** [3]. Rebuild the policy and planning capacities of the public sector at all levels, with emphasis on local authorities.
- The public policies required to achieve the universalisation of essential services **must be grounded on the principle of equality**, and must subordinate economic efficiency and private profit to the higher goals of democratic wealth distribution and civilised well-being.

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References:

[1] The Millennium Development Goals Report 2014. New York, United Nations, 2014, pp. 44-45

[2] Castro, José Esteban. (2013) Water is not (yet) a commodity: Commodification and rationalization revisited, Human Figurations, Vol 2,1

[3] For examples in Latin America see José Esteban Castro, Léo Heller, and María da Piedade Morais (Eds.), The Right to Water as Public Policy in Latin America: a Theoretical and Empirical Exploration [in Portuguese], Brasília: Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (IPEA) and WATERLAT-GOBACIT Network, 2015