

UN Consecrates Water As Public Good, Human Right

The United Nations Committee on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights has declared access to water a human right and establishes water as a social and cultural good, not merely an economic commodity.

GENEVA, Nov 27 (IPS) - The United Nations Committee on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights issued a statement Wednesday declaring access to water a human right and stating that water is a social and cultural good, not merely an economic commodity.

The Committee stressed that the 145 countries that have ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights are now obligated to progressively ensure access to clean water, "equitably and without discrimination".

Wednesday's declaration by the Committee took the form of a "General Comment", which is the mechanism for providing interpretation of the Covenant.

Prior to the adoption of the document, representatives from the public sector, private enterprise and independent institutions engaged in debate that focussed on ownership of water resources and the appropriateness of privatising production and distribution systems.

The final version of the General Comment omitted opinions on privatisation because the members of the Committee agreed "not to politicise the issue," said one of its members, speaking on condition of anonymity.

However, the statement does clearly define the public nature of water as "a limited natural resource and a public commodity fundamental to life and health."

Shortly after the UN Committee on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights announced its decision Wednesday, the World Health Organisation (WHO) issued its own statement, calling the General Comment "an unprecedented step".

WHO director-general Gro Harlem Brundtland said the declaration of water as a human right "is a major boost in efforts to achieve the (UN General Assembly's) Millennium Development Goals of halving the number of people without access to water and sanitation by 2015 -- two pre-requisites for health."

"The human right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, affordable, physically accessible, safe and acceptable water for personal and domestic uses," states the Committee document.

"While 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 Committee is made up of 18 human rights experts who are designated by the member governments but act in an independent capacity.

The announcement comes ahead of the 2003 celebration of the International Year of Freshwater, declared by the UN.

The Committee's General Comment will be presented to the third World Water Forum and Ministerial Conference to take place in March in the Japanese city of Kyoto.

Eibe Riedel, a German national, serving as the Committee's rapporteur on water, said analysis of the issue generally has been conducted from the perspective of individual consequences, without attending to the role of government.

Nor were transnational waters or irrigation regulations considered, he said.

Among the figures cited in the Committee debate were that 1.1 billion people in the world do not have regular access to clean water and some 2.4 billion do not have adequate sanitation or sewerage.

By 2025, some 3.0 billion people will suffer the effects of water shortages, predicts El Hadji Guissé, special rapporteur on water rights for the UN Subcommission on the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights.

Guissé laments that water has become a commodity that is "sold to the highest bidder," and the way water is managed, he said, is subject "to the laws of corruption."

In his country, Senegal, water services were privatised and are now owned by a French consortium. Now, says Guissé, the country has less water available and it is of worse quality than before.

The same situation has emerged in other African nations, where transnational corporations have acquired water reservoirs, motivated only by profit, he says.

Jean Ziegler, the UN Commission on Human Rights special rapporteur for the right to food, noted the experience of the Bolivian city of Cochabamba, where water service rates doubled after privatisation.

Massive protests in 1999 in the streets of Cochabamba forced the government to revise its policy on ownership of water distribution services, stressed Ziegler.

In contrast, Jack Moss, representing the private firm Suez, which specialises in the exploitation of water services, said during the debate, according to the UN, that "measures to privatise water services could be considered a 'mass salvation against want of water'."

Simon Walker, an expert from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human

Rights, noted the tendency of some governments "to put pressure on others to privatise some of their public sectors."

These states party to international agreements have no obligation to do so, he added.

Mireille Cosy, spokeswoman for the World Trade Organisation (WTO), clarified that the body's Agreement on Trade in Services does not require privatisation or deregulation of any water service activities.

The UN Committee on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights consists of Eibe Riedel (Germany), Mahmoud Samir Ahmed (Egypt), Clement Atanga (Cameroon), Rocio Barahona Riera (Costa Rica) Virginia Bonoan-Dandan (Philippines - current Chair), Dumitru Ceausu (Romania), Abdessatar Grissa (Tunisia), Paul Hunt (New Zealand), Yuri Kolosov (Russia), Giorgio Malinverni (Switzerland) and Jaime Marchán Romero (Ecuador).

Rounding out the list are Sergei Martynov (Belarus), Ariranga Govindasamy Pillay (Mauricio), Kenneth Osborne Rattray (Jamaica), Walid M. Sa'di (Jordan), Philippe Texier (France), Nutan Thapalia (Nepal), and Javier Wimer Zambrano (Mexico).

According to the General Comment, "realisation of the right (to water) should be feasible and practicable, since all states parties exercise control over a broad range of resources, including water, technology, financial resources and international assistance, as with all other rights in the Covenant. (END/2002)