

Water from a Human Right's perspective

Human Rights ...

Oxford English Dictionary defines human rights as "the set of entitlements held to belong to every person as a condition of being human" (Human rights, 2014). We are all entitled to these rights simply because we are human beings. United Nations Human Rights states, through its Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), that human rights "are rights inherent to all human beings, whatever our nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status. We are all equally entitled to our human rights without discrimination. These rights are all interrelated, interdependent and indivisible" (OHCHR, 2014).

To better understand the human rights, here are some examples mentioned by OHCHR: right to life, equality before the law and freedom of expression; the rights to work, social security and education, and many others. They are specifically mentioned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted on 10 December 1948 by the United Nations.

... And Water

Water is strongly related to a significant number of other human rights, for instance threatening the very right to existence if access to water is not secured. However, a considerable number of people live without access to safe and clean water or sanitation, and it was only recently that water was recognized as a human right in itself. On 28 July 2010, United Nations General Assembly explicitly recognized the human right to water and sanitation. It is now acknowledged that clean drinking water and sanitation are essential to the realization of other human rights (Dugard, 2010, p. 178). By establishing a formal recognition for water as a human right, and setting up a legal framework, it helps facing the competition for water resources and securing the water necessary for human needs (Björklund & Sjödin, 2010). The same authors emphasize that "in global average terms, water for household consumption only accounts for less than 10 percent of the overall human water use. Therefore it does not pose any major threat to natural freshwater availability" (p. 4).

Figures for access to water and sanitation:

www.unicef.org/media/files/JMPreport2012.pdf

Sustainability Dimensions of Water

Water and its usage have to be approached from a holistic perspective, as it involves a "multifaceted nature of inadequate water access" (Björklund & Sjödin, 2010). It represents a core component for sustainable development, and therefore the approach to water should reflect the three dimensions: environmental, social and economic.

Environmental Sustainability: Water is essential for all life on Earth and a key component of its major cycles (i.e. hydrological cycle and nutrient cycle), which ensures a proper functioning of all ecosystems essential to secure human right to water (Björklund & Sjödin,

2010). Moreover, freshwater is considered as one of the planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009) with a strong interdependence with the others.

Social Sustainability: Unequal access to water, increase of pressure on water sources due to population growth, poverty and social inequalities, gender and cultural issues - as women play the main role in securing water for the households - all play an important role in the sustainable development of water use and access (WWAP, 2012).

Economic Sustainability: Subsidies and tariff policies have to be carefully considered from a human right perspective. Price of water for the poor should be calculated with regards to their income and should not be disproportionate from the price paid by the rich (Björklund & Sjödin, 2010). Moreover, the economical approach to water should be carefully analysed. The major challenge for the authorities, from an economic perspective is: availability, affordability and sustainable financing.

Water and MDGs

Established in 2000, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aim at making the world more sustainable, with a deadline of achievement for 2015. A number of eight major goals were set, including water issues, under the environmental sustainability goal (7c on the MDG list). Its target is to, until 2015, reduce the number of people who lack: “sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation“ by half (MDG report, 2014, p. 43). In the report from 2014 a progress is visible and an additional 2.3 billion people have gotten improved drinking water, compared to 1990. However, as of 2012, there are around 748 million people that still rely on unsafe drinking water taken directly from rivers, ponds and lakes or other poorly protected sources. The report states that some sub-categories of the population are more affected than others: people in the rural areas, the poor and minorities.

Water as a Human Right and Commodity: Conflicts over Use

From an economic perspective, the “commodity approach” to water is dominating (Langford, 2005). The main features, as Langford (2005) identified, are: price for water, water delivery based on market mechanisms, private ownership of water. From a social perspective, water is seen as a human right, and Langford (2005) mentions that “human dignity comes first, and that universal access to sufficient water for basic needs is an absolute and non-negotiable priority” (p. 275). Treating water as a human right implies certain legal aspects and obligations for authorities that could contribute to a more equitable allocation of social and economic benefits related to water and its use (WWAP, 2012). Competing use for scarce water resources, also increase the need for good water management (WWAP, 2012). Water is vital for both natural ecosystems and for human society – agriculture, industry and households. Having in mind the challenges we face, e.g., with increased water scarcity, climate change, population growth and general environmental degradation, we need to treat water from a holistic perspective.

Figures on global freshwater water use – agriculture, industry, human needs:

http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/SC/pdf/WWAP_WWDR4_Facts_and_Figures.pdf

Additional cases

Below are two extra case studies that can, similar to Cochabamba, be used for a role play. These cases, from Bangladesh and China, have a stronger focus on hydropower, which can also be approached from a human rights perspective.

Bangladesh (Farakka Dam) Economy, Ecology and Political aspects of water

Bangladesh is located at the end of Ganges basin and the water supply from the Ganges River enters into Bangladesh through Gorai River. The upstream water supply from the Ganges River is vital for the agriculture, forestry, industry and ensuring drinking water for the local people around the basin. Maintaining the proper river depth and quality of water also depends on water supply from Ganges River. Therefore the diversion created by India at Farakka on Ganges, led to a significant alteration in the water flow in the Gorai River in Bangladesh. The water flow during monsoon (July-October) has increased whilst it has decreased during the dry season (November-April). Inadequate flow during dry season led to a leakage of saline water into the stream. The stakeholders who were the victims of this dam were farmers, fishermen, industries, boatmen and local people who entirely or partly depend on the Gorai River. The rice paddy production significantly decreased due to the intolerance to salinity, something that led to large economic losses for the farmers. The salinity also affected the ground water quality negatively and led to more health hazard among the public. Some timber species cannot sustain in saline soil which led to both ecosystem loss and financial loss for the forest industry. Most importantly the quality of drinking water in both ground and surface area was drastically reduced, which led to more health hazards for the local people (Mirza, 1998). The altered water flow also hampered communication, as many local inhabitants take the rivers as a cheaper way to commute. The main objective of constructing of the Farakka Dam was to restore the navigation of two main rivers of India (Hoogly, Bhagirathi) to make transportation, communication and business easier for the city of Calcutta.

China and the 3 Gorges Dam and its environmental impacts

The Three-Gorges Dam (TGD) and the South-to-North Water Transfer Project (SNWTP) will affect frequency and intensity of severe floods in the Poyang Lake region. In the last decades the area surrounding the lower and middle part of the Changjiang River faced severe floods which resulted in large impacts on the agricultural economy. The increasing number of abnormal rainfall in 1954 and 1998 is said to be the reason behind the floods. Deforestation in the upper Changjiang River and consequent soil erosion, along with construction of large levees surrounding the river banks has resulted in a reduction of flood water storage capacity in the river. After the flood in 1998, the Chinese government initiated a policy of constantly closing and opening of the levees dependent upon the water level in the lake. After the completion of TGD and water diversion from the Danjiangkou Dam by the SNWTP, the hydrological cycle became more complex because dampening the water level of the river caused severe effect on river ecosystem. The changing of hydrology during summer and spring had negative effect on the water demand at the rice plantations. Moreover, the water reservoirs are suffering from eutrophication and there are some signs of increased heavy metal concentration in the groundwater, something that could potentially harm human health and ecosystem (Nakayama & Shankman, 2013). Not only farming community and ecosystem

were negatively affected by the dam, but fishing communities' livelihoods also face adverse impacts due to hydrological alteration (Jiang, Ban, Wang, & Cai, 2014). Although the intention of the Chinese government was to prevent flood, disparity within the geographical area made the impacts of Three Gorges dam more devastating.

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- Additional resources to complement water as a Human Right:*
- Human Rights: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Pages/UDHRMaterials.aspx>.
- Water: http://www.unwater.org/www.zaragoza.es/contenidos/medioambiente/onu/1090-eng_A_Post-2015_Global_Goal_for_Water.pdf.
- Human right to water – facts and figures (to be used as a general introduction): www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/pdf/facts_and_figures_human_right_to_water_eng.pdf.

Resources on Cochabamba

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Related visual material

<http://www.allmovie.com/movie/even-the-rain-v526438>.

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