

Water as a human right: antecedents, meaning, and challenges of implementation

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Abstract. In 2010, the United Nations added access to water and sanitation as a designated human right. The paper will explain the antecedents of this declaration, what is meant by a human right, why the UN took this action, what authority the UN has, and what it means for water and sanitation to be human rights. The antecedents will focus on emergence of an international consensus after World War II of the need to declare basic human rights. The role of thought leaders in water—stemming from international dialogue after the 1960's—will be traced to the current focus on issues and themes such as at the World Water Forums. Although progress has been made, millions of people remain in dire need. It is not only a matter of policy, but of empowerment. In many large cities, the cost to connect to a water utility can be several months' income for the poorest of households. Water scientists and engineers recognize that social justice in water management goes beyond access to basic drinking water and sanitation and extends to water and food, security against flooding, effective drainage, and clean streams. Providing these mostly-public goods requires more than governance and extends to reforms needed in deeply-entrenched cultural institutions. Scientists and engineers understand that water connects society, nature, and life in many ways and that solving water issues is about effective non-coercive collective action. The UN has this mission in concert with many other participants. In the end, free and empowered people can find ways to solve their common problems but they need help to apply multiple means to solve global human rights issues relating to water.