

Water - a basic human right

Privatizing water supplies punishes the world's poor

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MOST CANADIANS take clean drinking water for granted. We turn on the tap and wash. We open a bottle and drink.

But 1.1 billion of the world's 6 billion people do not have clean drinking water, such as protected springs and wells.

"(Clean) water is the essence of life, yet a whole lot of people, especially in the developing world, are being deprived of it," laments Bob Schmidt. Schmidt is animator for the Alberta chapter of the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace.

He places the blame squarely on the privatization of water delivery, which increases the cost of water without satisfying the thirst of the world's poorest people. He says millions of poor people find the tap turned off because they cannot pay their water bill. So in desperation, they turn to unsafe water sources.

Currently, about 300 million African people do not have access to safe water and sanitation. In East Africa, women and children now walk an average of 21 minutes each trip to collect water.

Contaminated water is the main cause of a wide range of diseases, including diarrhea, cholera, typhoid, hepatitis, dengue fever and malaria.

Every year in the developing world about two million people — most of them young children — die of diarrhea, one of the most easily prevented diseases.

Year of Fresh Water

Last year, a first step was taken to alleviate the water problem in the Third World when the United Nations Human Rights Commission and then the UN Committee on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights, declared access to water a basic human right alongside the right to food and shelter. The United Nations also declared 2003 as the International Year of Fresh Water.

Now, the CCODP and its global partners in the Third World are working to raise awareness about the value of water and why access to it is a treasured human right.

The organization has just made water the focus of its education and action campaigns for the next three years. Water: Life Before Profits is the theme of the campaign, which challenges the right of corporations to privatize and control water, a basic element essential for life.

During the first year, the campaign will focus on the effects of the privatization of water delivery, a process which organization officials say all too often, as a result of soaring water prices, leads to water becoming more scarce for the poor in urban areas of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

"We want to impress upon Canadians that water is a basic human right, a public trust and a collective responsibility," said Jack Panozzo, national spokesperson for CCODP in Ottawa.

"The whole idea is to raise some awareness of it, not just in its availability but also what is this thing called water, what kind of values do we place on it and



Bob Schmidt says 'clean water is the essence of life.'



A thirsty Afghanistan child waits for water.

really what's our relationship to it," explained Schmidt. Parishes have been sent kits on the water issue for parishioners to study. The water campaign builds on the CCODP's recent education and action program on the right to food and the patenting of life. During that campaign, the organization challenged corporate patenting and control of seeds that are essential to the survival of poor subsistence farmers in the South. Almost 260,000 people from across Canada sent cards to Prime Minister Jean Chretien on this issue.

At the heart of the water campaign is a four-point Water Declaration, which CCODP, the Church's arm for international solidarity, hopes Canadians will study and then sign. By signing the declaration, Canadians commit themselves to upholding its principles, one of which asserts that access to water is a basic



Bottled water is the norm in Canada, only a dream to much of the world.

human right.

"So when you sign this card, you are really saying that water belongs to everyone, that everyone should have a right to access clean water and because of that everyone has a role in maintaining the resource, which of course is in direct opposition to privatization," Schmidt explained.

The signed declarations, hopefully hundreds of thousands of them, will be sent to the Canadian government, which doesn't see access to water as a right, noted Panozzo.

At an April 22, 2002 meeting of the UN Commission on Human Rights, Canada distinguished itself among 53 countries by being the only country to vote No to a resolution calling for access to water and sanitation to be recognized as a fundamental right alongside the right

to food and shelter. Thirty-seven countries voted Yes, in-

cluding Brazil, China, Cuba and Vietnam.

Fifteen abstained from the vote, including France, Germany and Britain.

Why Canada voted No is an official secret but perplexed CCODP officials think they have the answer.

Canada has the second largest supply of fresh water in the world, behind only Finland, and "if it declares access to water a basic human right, it really can't sell it," Schmidt said.

"So in a way the present government is keeping its options open."

Panozzo agrees, noting that Canada prefers to see water as a human need, which in his view makes a world of difference.

"If water is a need, you can commodify it and sell it," he said. "But if it is a human right it, you can't do that."

World leaders have committed themselves to reducing by half the numbers of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water by 2015.

The World Bank estimates that up to \$870 billion will be needed over the next 12 years to improve access for safe water and sanitation in developing countries. In the absence of international direct funding to improve water access in poor countries, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are demanding that countries privatize water supplies, hoping that the private sector will supply the funds that rich nations refuse to supply.

CCODP officials disagree, saying that wherever water supplies have been privatized, the poor are suffering, because the main goal of the water companies is to make a profit. The revenues of the 10 largest multinational water companies in 2001 were US\$30 billion. Water contracts are usually granted for 15 to 30 years, giving a guaranteed income to giant corporations.

In Manila, the world's largest experiment with the privatization of water delivery has left a trail of broken promises and rising water rates. After six years, one in five Manila residents — nearly two million people — are still without the water service promised in return for privatization.

Scrounge dirty water

"They must depend on what they can scrounge from broken water pipes or dirty water sources," reveals a CCODP document. "Those with water service have trouble paying the rapidly escalating fees.

"For poor families who can only afford instant noodles, the latest water increase might mean they cannot eat for two days."

In 1999, the World Bank insisted Ghana privatize its publicly owned services as a condition for further loans. As a result, water prices there have risen by 300 percent in just three years.

Fresh water, according to the CCODP, is a shared legacy, a public trust and a collective responsibility that must be managed collectively and democratically.

"Privatization is a real threat to the common good and to universal access to safe drinking water," maintains Schmidt. "Water is a sacred gift that connects all life and its value to the common good takes priority over any possible commercial value."