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Right to Water

Nearly a billion people, the majority of whom live in the developing world, lack access to clean, safe, potable water. Over 750,000 people die each year from insufficient safe water and water-related diseases, and of these nearly 2,000 per day are children under the age of five (WHO/UNICEF 2013). Ensuring adequate safe water is thus a critical development issue. This is particularly important in developing countries with inequitable water provision systems and high poverty rates. Given current realities, the call for a universal right to water is essential and urgent. In response to global crises and water justice movements, in a 2010 resolution the United Nations (UN) General Assembly "recognized the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights." The UN now views the right to water as a policy imperative and as a necessity for states to ensure human development—especially to allow for the realization of other rights, such as health. The right to water is also linked to human dignity, equality, and social

justice (Barlow 2008; Sultana and Loftus 2012). Thus it is central to concerns of sustainability and sustainable development more broadly.

The important normative components of the right to water—quality, reliability, affordability, and accessibility—were captured in UN General Comment 15 in 2002. A report on "good practices" by Catarina de Albuquerque, the UN special rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation, adds availability, quality/safety, and acceptability as important, too; additional cross-cutting criteria are accountability, sustainability, nondiscrimination, and participation (de Albuquerque 2012). These issues are essential to achieving a meaningful right to water, but, as de Albuquerque explains, the "criteria are deliberately broad, flexible and adaptable. Human rights law does not prescribe a particular choice of policy or technology, but instead calls for context-specific solutions. It requires individual needs to be met and therefore excludes one-size-fits-all solutions" (2012, 35). Determining actual standards is left up to national governments but within the broader guidelines.



Indian women fill buckets with water on the outskirts of Hyderabad on March 2, 2009, after the main waterpipe into the southern city developed a leak. (NOAH SEELAM/AFP/Getty Images.)

Progressive realization is critical to reach a full right to water for all people over time.

The implementation and understanding of the right to water are not without controversy. There are lingering questions as to what actually constitutes a right to water in implementable terms and how it should be ensured and enforced, as well as whether the right is held individually or collectively. Abstract legal debates translate to on-the-ground complexity. Yet the right to water must be viewed not only as a set of technical challenges but as a complex issue with political, social, and ecological aspects. Across communities and groups in the developing world, it is crucial to understand the material struggles for water, thereby enabling greater collectivizing and learning from success stories. Also, the right to water, which focuses on human rights and justice and the necessity of safe water for human survival, is not the same as water rights (which are about economic and legal concessions, water markets,

agricultural uses, and property rights). Though these terms are often conflated, the distinction is an important one for understanding and pursuing a right to water.

One hotly debated aspect of the right to water is whether water should be managed as a commons with community participation or as a privatized commodity. The role of private actors (such as corporations and companies) is controversial, as some argue that they can thwart goals of water justice where there is greater private capture of water resources rather than ensuring equitable water access (Bakker 2010; Shiva 2002). The privatization of water sources and systems poses grave concerns, especially because the poor can effectively be driven out of the market. Concerns continue to exist over the minimum core of this international right, measurability and accountability, and co-optation by entities motivated by private gain that can potentially render the right to water an empty slogan, without meaningful benefits for people facing water crises.

Two notable examples demonstrate the challenges involved in the right to water (see Sultana and Loftus for several case studies). Bolivia's famous "water wars" in Cochabamba are widely regarded as having prompted the global move toward the right to water and a broadly defined water justice movement against privatization. When Bolivia privatized water supplies, leading to price hikes and irregular availability, the country's poor and marginalized communities were deprived of water. Mass public protests ultimately forced the Bolivian government to cancel contracts with private companies and make water a public good with affordable pricing. Sustaining the gains of a water justice movement is a complex and difficult task, and inequities in water access in Bolivia remain.

In South Africa, which enshrined the right to water in its post-apartheid constitution in order to address the significant discrepancy in water supplies and availability across communities, the law articulated a basic minimum amount of water that must be available to all. Some groups deemed this amount insufficient and unreasonable, arguing that the law did not necessarily democratize water governance or deter the wealthy from wasting water. The South African case demonstrates the challenges in implementation through constitutional change and in defining the minimum core content of the right to water.

Not only a legal or human rights issue, the right to water can also be a tool for social change and galvanizing social movements. Beyond claims to specific quantities of water, the right to water prompts the questioning of assumptions within water management in an attempt to reorganize the power dynamics in water governance. Discussions about realizing and safeguarding greater access to safe potable water must address issues pertaining to politics, scale, and distribution. To achieve

the goals of social justice and fairness in terms of access to clean water, the ways that water is produced, controlled, distributed, and exchanged must be democratized, with an emphasis on participation by the communities most in need. The right to water can prompt larger debates on equity, justice, democracy, development, citizenship, and belonging. The right to water frames the larger plight of the poor in many developing countries, and can draw attention to state policies that exacerbate or fail to resolve injustices in everyday life. Around the world, the work of scholars, activists, and various organizations points to the potential of individual and collaborative involvement in right-to-water activities through research, personal and community action, and civic engagement. The UN Special Rapporteur, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Blue Planet Project, Municipal Services Project, Red Vida, Food and Water Watch, the Transatlantic Institute, and the Pacific Institute are examples of bodies dedicated to the right to water.

The right to water may mean different things to different constituencies. In some instances it may enable communities to make demands of the state to ensure equitable water provision; in others it can hold broader meanings of citizenship and the right to participate in more inclusive democracies. The right to water can thus represent a powerful discourse, a policy imperative, and a mobilizing impetus.

See also Consumption; Drought; Ethics; Health and the Environment; Human Rights; Pollution; Poverty; Right to Food; Sustainable Development; Water Access and Sanitation; Water Security.

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Rights-Based Approach to Development see
Sustainable Development

Risk Analysis

Risk analysis is a science-based approach to decision making under uncertainty. It is frequently described as comprising three tasks: risk management, risk assessment, and risk communication (see Figure 1). It can be distinguished from other decision-making paradigms by the manner in which it addresses what is known—the scientific evidence—and

what is not known—the uncertainty—in the risk assessment task as well as by its intentional consideration of the effects of uncertainty on decision outcomes in the risk management task. Risk analysis is especially well suited to sustainability because of the central role that uncertainty plays in many sustainability issues.