

# At Last, a Human Right to Water

Good news for thirsty people around the globe: The UN affirms the right to safe and clean drinking water.

by Daniel Moss  
posted Jul 30, 2010



Photo by [Living Water International](#).

A remarkable piece of water history should have been headline news everywhere this week.

After over a decade of grassroots organizing and lobbying, the global water justice movement achieved a significant victory when the United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to affirm "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 resolution—put forward by Bolivia and co-sponsored by 35 states—passed overwhelmingly with 122 states voting in favor and 41 abstaining.

Embarrassed to go on record against the right to this fundamental liquid, not one country voted against it.

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-Maude Barlow

"We're absolutely thrilled," said [Maude Barlow](#), former senior advisor on water to the president of the UN General Assembly and current national chairwoman of the Council of Canadians and the Washington, D.C.-based Food and Water Watch. "This is a historic day. I think every now and then, the human species advances somewhat in our evolution, and today was one of those advances."

The [Universal Declaration on Human Rights](#), approved in 1948, did not specifically recognize a right to water. But in recent decades, worsening water scarcity and contamination, [aggravated by global climate change](#), has made a resolution on water rights more urgent, said advocates.

## Political abstentions

"It was a great honor to be present as the UN General Assembly took this historic step forward in the struggle for a just world," says Barlow. "It is sad however, that Canada chose not to participate in this important moment in history." The United States also abstained in the vote.

Some country delegations said they abstained because they did not get instructions from their capitals

in time to confirm their positions. Others were afraid of the resolution's implications for water they share with other nations, known as transboundary water. (However, General Assembly resolutions are non-binding political statements). Still others feared how the resolution would be interpreted and put it into practice, especially given that more than 2.6 billion people are without access to proper sanitation.

“We urged the UK government to support the resolution, but regrettably they have chosen to ignore our request,” said Steve Bloomfield, head of the England’s public water utilities union.

Despite the abstentions, the UN power politics to which world citizens have grown accustomed did not prevail. [As the world water crisis has worsened](#), opposition to this resolution became increasingly difficult to justify.

Next month, a meeting will be held to review progress on the Millennium Development Goals, one of which is to reduce by half the number of people without sanitation. “It would have looked very bad indeed at that meeting for countries to have voted against the right to sanitation,” said Anil Naidoo, coordinator of the Blue Planet Project.

### **What a difference a word makes**

Pressures to weaken the resolution were considerable. Inserting the word "access" to water and sanitation was a point of debate. For diplomats, ensuring "access" would mean their governments would only have to guarantee that water is available for purchase, not that it is a fundamental right even for those who can't afford it.

That the resolution did not stop at "access" makes it more powerful. "It means governments have to provide the water even if people cannot pay for it . . . it's an important distinction," Barlow said.

The final resolution "calls upon States and international organizations to provide financial resources, capacity-building and technology transfer, through international assistance and co-operation, in particular to developing countries, in order to scale up efforts to provide safe, clean, accessible and affordable drinking water and sanitation for all."

### **The first step in a long struggle**

As with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the implementation of the resolution will likely be uneven and won through local advocacy campaigns.

The resolution will heighten pressure on countries to ensure that their citizens enjoy water and sanitation. As with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the implementation of the resolution will likely be uneven and won through local advocacy campaigns, for which the resolution will constitute a legal tool to strengthen advocacy for thirsty people around the globe.

"I thank all of you who stepped forward and took action to support recognition of the human right to water and sanitation," Naidoo wrote to supporters of the resolution after the vote. "But the vote is not the end of anything. It was never a goal in itself, it was more about what it will allow us to do after this in our campaigns, advocacy, and struggle. Our work is, in fact just beginning."



### [It's Everybody's Water](#)

It's time we fall in love with the bundle of atoms that makes Earth possible.

Grassroots efforts to ensure that communities have the knowledge, money, and legal backing to sustainably manage their water resources will continue their work—but they hope to find that work strengthened by the new resolution.

Despite its limitations, Naidoo feels that “this resolution [will] be an important step in a radical rethinking of how our water commons around the globe are managed.”

Naidoo reserved his final thanks for Bolivia’s [ambassador Pablo Solon](#). Bolivia has played a leadership role in securing the right to water and sanitation since the third World Water Forum in Kyoto. A visionary country working hand-in-hand with a global coalition can make a very big difference indeed.

Currently, Bolivia is building support for a similar [UN resolution on the rights of Mother Earth](#), which would seek, among other goals, to ensure the health of the world’s watersheds.

For now, though, the global water justice movement has achieved an impressive victory and an important tool. Carlos Beas of UCIZONI , an indigenous organization working on food sovereignty in Tehuantepec, Mexico said, “It’s approved. And just in time. Now we must put it into practice.”



Daniel Moss wrote this article for [YES! Magazine](#), a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas with practical actions. Daniel is coordinator of [Our Water Commons](#). He organizes and writes to ensure that our shared abundance is wisely managed. He served on the media team for the Peoples' Water Forum held in Istanbul.