

# Water should be a human right

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In this month's *PLoS Medicine* Editorial, the editors argue that -- despite recent international objections -- access to clean water should be recognised as a human right.

At the March 2009 United Nations (UN) meetings, coinciding with the World Water Forum, Canada, Russia, and the United States refused to support a declaration that would recognize water as a basic human right. But this flies in the face of considerable evidence that access to water, which is essential for health, is under threat, argue the editors. According to the [World Health Organization](#), 1.2 billion people worldwide do not have access to clean drinking water, and a further 2.6 billion lack adequate [sanitation](#) services, and these numbers are expected to rise. The UN has estimated that 2.8 billion people in 48 countries will be living in conditions of water stress or scarcity by 2025.

Three reasons are outlined for why access to clean water should be declared a basic human right. Firstly, access to clean water can substantially reduce the global burden disease caused by water-borne infections. Millions of people are affected each year by a range of water-borne diseases including diarrhea, which is responsible for 1.8 million potentially preventable deaths per year, mostly among children under the age of five. Secondly, the privatization of water—as witnessed in Bolivia, Ghana and other countries—has not effectively served the poor, who suffer the most from lack of access to clean water. As Maude Barlow, senior advisor on water issues to the president of the General Assembly of the UN, has argued, "high water rates, cut-offs to the poor, reduced services, broken promises and pollution have been the legacy of

privatization."

Thirdly, the prospect of global water scarcity—exacerbated by [climate change](#), industrial pollution, and population growth—means that no country is immune to a water crisis. The United States is facing the greatest water shortages of its history, and in Australia severe drought has caused dangerous water shortages in the Murray-Darling river basin, which provides the bulk of its food supply.

A human rights framework, argue the Editors, offers what the water situation needs—international recognition from which concerted action and targeted funding could flow; guaranteed standards against which the protected legal right to water could be monitored; and accountability mechanisms that could empower communities to advocate and lobby their governments to ensure that water is safe, affordable, and accessible to everyone.

More information: The PLoS Medicine Editors (2009) Clean [Water](#) Should Be Recognized as a Human Right. PLoS Med 6(6): e1000102. [medicine.plosjournals.org/perl...journal.pmed.1000102](http://medicine.plosjournals.org/perl...journal.pmed.1000102)

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