

Sharmilla Murthy, Assistant Professor, Suffolk University Law School

“Who Has Access to Water and What are the Consequences?”

Teaching Water: Global Perspectives on a Resource in Crisis

August 5-8, 2013, Harvard University

Time Tag: 2:18—21:30

What is the Human Right to Water and Sanitation Under International Law?

Key Content

In 2010 the UN General Assembly recognized the right to water.

Important considerations include:

- (8:20, 13:55) Physical accessibility
- (8:42, 17:00) Water quality
- (17:30) Affordability
- (10:42, 19:10) Water and cultural acceptability
- (11:26) Sanitation

Viewing Questions

Should people have to pay for water? Is water a commodity or a human right?

Time Tag: 21:30—25:36

Human Right to Water in a National Context

Key Content

In the post-Apartheid South African constitution citizens were guaranteed a minimum of 50 liters of water per day; those who wanted more water had to feed a meter to get it. This seemed to address the individual need for water but also the need for the government to recoup costs for water infrastructure.

In India, there is no acknowledgement of water as a human right, but it is considered by Indian courts to be part of the right-to-life provision of their constitution.

Even if the right is recognized, there are still bound to be issues around funds and political will needed to enforce and ensure rights are provided.

Viewing Questions

Did the South African system strike a balance between water as a human right and water as a commodity? What issues might citizens face if they are required to pay for additional water distribution?

Time Tag: 25:36—34:45

The Millennium Development Goals as they Relate to Water

Key Content

The Millennium Development Goals, drafted in 2000, aim to reduce global problems such as poverty, HIV/AIDS infection, gender discrimination, lack of access to health, water, and sanitation by varying percentages by 2015. The goal of increasing by half the number of people with access to water was accomplished in 2012, but there is good reason to question the validity of this statistic.

Viewing Questions

Is there a better way to confront the large world problems listed above than the Millennium Development Goals? What level of responsibility does the international community as a whole bear for addressing water issues in individual countries?

Time Tag: 34:45—48:15

Legal Basis of Water as a Human Right

Key Content

The idea of international human rights is fairly new. Provisions regarding civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights were passed in the 1960's. Water is not mentioned in any of these. In 2010 the UN General Assembly passed a resolution regarding the human right to water and sanitation. Forty one countries abstained from the vote.

Viewing Questions

Why would wealthy countries, like the US and countries in Western Europe, abstain from the UN vote in 2010?

Time Tag: 48:15—52:30

Enforceability of Water as a Human Right

Key Content

Enforcing the provisions around water and sanitation as a human right is very difficult, especially given the poverty and difficulties facing the nations with the biggest water issues.

Viewing Questions

What obstacles and barriers make it difficult to enforce UN provisions around water as a human right?

What is progressive realization?

What roles do individual countries and international entities like the UN have in supporting the right to water? How do you think their responsibilities differ?