



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, U.S. House of Representatives

“Realizing the Right to Safe Water and Sanitation”

Testimony by

William F. Schulz, President and CEO

Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

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Good morning Chairman McGovern, Chairman Wolf and the members of the Lantos Commission for Human Rights. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the human right to water and sanitation at this important hearing.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) is a nonsectarian organization founded in 1940 that advances human rights and social justice in the United States and around the world. On behalf of our 37,000 members and our 40 grassroots partner organizations around the globe, I am eager to share a few insights from our work for environmental justice. We are also extremely grateful to the UN Independent Expert on the human right to water for her diligent efforts to secure access to this vital resource for communities here and overseas.

What could be more fundamental to human life than access to water? If that is not a human right, nothing is. UUSC's goal is to ensure sustainable access to safe, sufficient, affordable water to every person on the planet. Let me give you some examples of how we and our partners are doing that.

First, we need to establish that access to water is indeed a human right. I recently traveled to Peru and Ecuador to visit with our program partners there. In Ecuador, I was privileged to meet indigenous leaders and young people from our partner El Movimiento Mi Cometa (the "My Kite" Movement) who campaigned successfully for the newly adopted Ecuadorean Constitution to include not only a human right to water provision but a commitment to the rights of the Earth itself. This is a groundbreaking development in human rights jurisprudence and the national ombudsman, Dr. Fernando Gutierrez Vera, whose duty it is to protect the rights of nature assured me that those rights will be enforced.

But establishing rights in a Constitution is one thing; seeing them take form in reality is another. In Cusco, Peru, the Federation of Water and Sanitation Workers of Peru (FENTAP) are working with the public utility of Cusco to create a new model for implementing the human right to water. The utility in Cusco is partnering with another public utility in Uruguay, in a "public- public" partnership, to share "best practices," increase efficiency; make water services an affordable reality and in the process prove that it is not just private companies that can operate water facilities with skill and effectiveness.. This is a model for many others around the world to emulate.

And Latin America is not the only part of the world where this issue is percolating. In Tanzania, the government has established a centralized water ministry that has doubled the national budget for water and sanitation services. In South Africa, communities are working through the national and international courts to ensure that the right to water, enshrined in the South African constitution, is more than just a rhetorical flourish in places like Soweto.

We are very encouraged by President Obama's interest in providing safe drinking water for vulnerable communities at home and abroad. On World Water Day 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recognized that “Water represents one of the great diplomatic and development opportunities of our time ... [it] will allow [us] to save millions of lives, feed the hungry, empower women, advance our national security interests, protect the environment and demonstrate to billions of people that the United States cares.....” The Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act, enacted with bipartisan support in 2005, is a vital initial step towards these goals but there is much more that must be done.

The Obama Administration has taken important steps to signal support for the realization of the human right to water but is limited by the fact that the U.S. has not ratified the treaties that require direct human right to water obligations, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women. But the US is a member of the World Health Organization, which has worked in support of the human right to water, and of the UN Development Programme, which recommended in a

2006 report implementation of the human right to water as a key path to development and way out of poverty

Now we urge Congress to:

- Work to ensure full funding and implementation of the Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act, with aid for sustainable, appropriate technology and water and sanitation services to the most marginalized communities in countries with the greatest need;
- Support the redefinition of the mandate of the Independent Expert to that of a “Special Rapporteur” so that she may receive and investigate claims of violations of the right to water and sanitation;
- Hold Congressional hearings to review the findings of the Independent Expert’s mission to the United States and take action on recommendations that address the needs of the lowest income communities in the United States and abroad;
- Through U.S. foreign policy and diplomacy, encourage foreign governments to prioritize funding in their national budgets for water and sanitation services for the most marginalized populations; and

- Urge the Obama administration to adopt an executive order to create an interagency commission to implement human rights at home, including the human rights to water and sanitation for the poorest communities, regardless of age, gender, race, or religious and ethnic background.

Water is a universal human need and a common inspiration, something that was brought home to me by a story from Kenya where a courageous group of human rights defenders have spent their lives and their blood, literally, to save the last rain forest from tea plantations; to plant trees and crops; and to save the streams that feed Lake Victoria, the head waters of the great Nile River. Many of these trees are planted on school grounds and the teachers have told us that the trees and the water are having an incredible effect on the children. They find them out under the trees, resting, smiling, singing, and thinking. Most importantly, the fighting on the school grounds among the children has greatly diminished. May we be as inspired as those children. The human right to water truly is a bipartisan issue because the human need for water is a universal need. Thank you again for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to testify.