

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing:
Realizing the Right to Safe Water and Sanitation

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Testimony

Submitted by



CHURCH WORLD SERVICE

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Mr. Chairman, honorable members of the House of Representatives, distinguished members of this panel, and honored guests. I am the Rev. John L. McCullough, Chief Executive Officer of Church World Service, an international development, relief and refugee assistance organization - including here in the United States – and serving on behalf of thirty-seven U.S. national Churches. I am honored to address you on the vital matter of the right to water and sanitation, on behalf of CWS as an advocate for those who have struggled far too long to live without it, and those who believe the lack of access to water and sanitation is an injustice that can be corrected.

I commend the United States government for extending its invitation to the UN Independent Expert Catarina de Albuquerque, and express my appreciation to Congressman Jim McGovern and Congressman Frank Wolf, co-chairs of the Lantos Commission, for providing her and other witnesses with the opportunity to speak to this body.

Church World Service recognizes the extraordinary meaning and power of water. Water, in the worship practices of many religions, flows with the element of promise about our humanity and confidence in the future. These practices and our narratives of God's creation of the universe are indicators of a profound continuing human understanding of this reality – all life has begun in and depends on water.

Water has a sacred character and is the Creator's gift to us: to be respected, preserved and shared for the benefit of all people and the wider creation. The right to water is inherently a universal human right. By its very nature it cannot be treated as just another commodity among many. Water is a public trust and a public good.

The crisis in water and sanitation affects foremost the most vulnerable in the human community: the marginalized and excluded, the poor, and the oppressed. This disproportionate impact should be repugnant to our sense of justice and fairness in human society, and to our respect for the equality of human persons in their basic human needs and rights.

Church World Service has extensive experience in the development of water and sanitation projects with communities in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America. Our work embodies a "rights-based" approach that begins with inviting the formation of village water committees. This foundational step promotes community solidarity, empowers women, and fosters a sense of water and sanitation as necessary for dignified human life. This is followed by the introduction of appropriate technology with training in the means to build and maintain it. The goal is an outcome that is technically, economically and environmentally sustainable by the community.

Our work in rural Cambodia may provide a useful example, where partner communities identify their needs, organize the work and provide the labor. CWS provides training and materials. By working together in this way, communities in Cambodia have improved wells and built latrines. One simple technology they have utilized is a bio-sand filter, at a cost of \$15-20. This is a simple catchment box with gravel covered by sand, the surface of which forms a bio-dynamic wet film that traps and consumes micro-organisms. Bio-sand filters can remove most e-coli, worms and parasites, iron and manganese, and other toxicants from contaminated water. The results are less water-borne diseases, including chronic diarrhea and typhoid, and improved health.

Repeatedly in our experience, people struggling to overcome poverty have assumed responsibility for the good management of their new resource, and have expanded and derived benefits from it that we often did not imagine. They often go on to accompany others on similar journeys. Health improves, hours spent collecting water become available for other tasks, children are freed to attend school, and the benefits compound. Best of all, people discover in themselves new power and ability to organize and to implement plans of the betterment for their communities; and their faith in the future becomes inspired.

Water and sanitation are fundamental to life and human flourishing, so I want to close by urging Congress to fully fund the accounts for poverty-focused humanitarian and development assistance for 2011 and 2012. These accounts total less than 1 percent of the budget, but they are vital for helping provide clean water and meet other basic needs of impoverished people. Let us not weaken or abandon our moral and humanitarian responsibility to help vulnerable members of the human family. Our lives here in the United States are bound together with the lives of others, and so is the sustainability of our common future. We cannot ignore their needs without endangering our own.

As a people, we can be compassionate with our neighbors, helping to build a more just world with enough for all. We can assist our neighbors around the world to help themselves. For God's sake, and for the sake of one another, let us do no less.

Thank you.