



WECF

The Right to Water

Position Paper

WECF – Women in Europe for a Common Future

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WECF's Vision on the Right to Water

WECF promotes the right to water for all and calls for standards that go beyond the existing standards. We believe that in accordance with the Millennium Development Goals the number of population lacking access to safe and affordable water needs to be reduced to a minimum.

Many human rights cannot be enjoyed without water. The *right to life* is one of the fundamental concepts involving water directly (Universal Declaration of Human Rights). The *right to food* is a central right linked to water safety and access to water (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ICESCR). The *right to self-determination* includes "the right of people to manage their own resources" and thus water (General Comment No. 12 to the ICESCR). Furthermore, *the right to an adequate standard of living* implies the secure access to water sources (ICESCR). The *right to housing* states "the right to adequate housing should have sustainable access to natural and common resources, safe drinking water (...) sanitation and washing facilities" (General Comment No. 4 to the ICESCR). Finally, the *right to education* cannot be realised in some regions due to the fact that many children are forced to spend long hours walking to a water source and bringing water home (Universal Declaration to Human Rights). Thus, the right to water deserves its place in the human rights catalogue.

Present Situation

"884 million people in the world lack access to safe drinking water. 1.6 mil-

lion people, mostly children, die each year from water and sanitation related causes.¹ Since almost 70% of the 1.3 billion people living in extreme poverty are women, they very often experience difficulties accessing safe water and thus sanitation.² The poor, women and children are the most vulnerable groups suffering from the problematic access to water sources.

The situation in the EECCA countries demonstrates that the "portion of urban populations having access to centralised water services remains at a high level, but the quality of that access has deteriorated: disruptions of water supply, pipe breaks, and unaccounted-for-water [i.e. water leaks] have steadily increased in recent years."³ Furthermore, the water supply situation in the region is quite diverse: bigger cities and states have better developed systems than smaller states and rural areas.⁴

Legal Basis

The right to water is explicitly mentioned in international treaties. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) demands in Art. 14 (2) (h) that state parties "ensure to women the right (...) to enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to (...) sanitation (...) and water supply (...). The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1988) ensures the access to clean drinking water for children in relation to health care (Art. 24).

The right is further promoted by the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), specifically by Goal 3 (Pro-

mote Gender Equality and Empower Women), Goal 4 (Child Health), Goal 5 (Improve Maternal Health), and Goal 7 (Ensure Environmental Sustainability). The Goal 7, Target 3 focuses exclusively on the issues of safe drinking water and sanitation. The central aim in water policy in accordance with these MDGs is to halve the number of the world's population without access to water and sanitation by 2015.

The Protocol on Water and Health (1999) promotes the human health through good water management. The Protocol of the UN Economic Commission for Europe is the first international agreement of its kind adopted specifically to attain an adequate supply of safe drinking water and adequate sanitation for everyone, and effectively protect water used as a source of drinking water.

Finally, General Comment No. 15 (2002) to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) aims at protecting human health by securing the human right to water. Art. 2 of the General Comment sets out specific criteria that define the right precisely: "the human right to water entitles everyone to **sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water** for personal and domestic uses."

First, the right is characterised by sufficiency, i.e. one should have access to a sufficient amount of water (minimum 7.5 litres per capita per day).⁵ WECF calls for a minimum of 20 litres per capita per day.

The second criterion is **safety**. Water should be **safe** for drinking and other household purposes. This criterion is meant as safeguard to protect the population from the consumption of polluted water that might threaten a person's health. In relation to this criterion, *WECF calls strongly for safe and sustainable sanitation*⁶ as in the EECCA region pit latrines and unsafe wastewater treatment are a main reason for polluted water sources. WECF also stresses that water for personal hygiene, such as for washing hands, needs to be safe, since this reduced outbreaks of water related diseases by 50%.⁷

The acceptability (third criterion) implies that water should be acceptable in terms of colour and odour.

The **physical accessibility** is one of the core concepts. Internationally it is agreed that a water source should be reached within less than 30 minutes of walk and closer than 1 kilometre. For In some cases in the EECCA region, water sources are remote in more than one kilometre from the house, which leads to unsafe water storage practices. For people who have to walk long ways to reach a source of water it is a high burden, in particular in cold winters when paths are icy and muddy. Furthermore, physically disabled women and young mothers suffer from long distances. *Thus WECF calls for house connections or at least street taps for every community.*

Finally, water must be **affordable** for everyone. This requires that water and other related services should match the paying ability of local people.⁹ *WECF calls for the minimum amount of water (20 litres per capita per day) to be free of charge and an adequate price for every litre used beyond the minimum amount. Furthermore, WECF calls for transparency and information about price policies.*

Gender and Water

Specific problems arise from gender related issues in relation to water. Women and men perform distinct

responsibilities in using and managing water and water systems. In many developing countries, and in some EECCA countries, women and girls collect water for cooking, washing, cleaning, maintaining health and hygiene, raising small livestock and growing food. Rural men need water for irrigation and larger livestock, but women often care for the milk cattle and young animals. Women also oversee family health. Women often spend long hours to carry water home. Because of the differing gender roles, women and men have different stakes in water use, which need to be taken into consideration.

In the EU and EECCA region, the gender roles regarding water management are less defined. However, in rural areas without access to safe drinking water and sanitation systems, women and girls are more affected when no safe public toilets are available, e.g. in schools or at the workplace. In some EECCA regions, collecting drinking water from wells is also more often a women's than a men's job. Interestingly, when men or boys are responsible for drinking water collection, they might more often have access to a car, motorbike, horse or donkey.

WECF's Claim

WECF calls for the promotion and protection of the right to water for all. WECF calls upon international bodies and Governments to co-operate towards the achievement of this important aim on the international and national level. The following guidelines need to be taken into consideration without discrimination upon gender, age, physical ability, ethnicity, nationality or social status:

- Safe and acceptable drinking water should be accessible at the household/school/ workplace and should be affordable also for the lowest income groups in society; differentiated tariffs and cross subsidising is recommended;
- Equal position of men and women in decision-making processes on water issues, such as distribution, consumption and others;

- Sustainable approaches on water management that protect public health and the environment for present and future generations;
- Free access to information about water quality, safety and related issues.
- Transparent information about decisions on and build-up of water tariffs, ownership and contracts of water operating companies.

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Sources:

- ¹ UN Independent Expert on Water and Sanitation: *Water and Sanitation: A Matter of Rights*, March 2009, <http://www.unhcr.ch/hurricane/hurricane.nsf/0/5B089A4EE495E7ADC125757F006065D0?opendocument>.
- ² WHO, *The Right to Water*, 2003.
- ³ OECD, *Financing Water Supply and Sanitation in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia*, 2007.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ WHO, *Guidelines for Drinking-water Quality*, Vol.1, 2008, p. 90.
- ⁶ Definition see WECF, *Making Sustainable Sanitation Work for Women and Men*, 2009, p. 6.
- ⁷ *The Lancet: Curtis/Cairncross, Effects of Washing Hands*, May 2003, <http://www.hygienecentral.org.uk/pdf/CurtisHandwashing.pdf>.
- ⁸ WHO, *Guidelines for Drinking-water Quality*, Vol.1, 2008, p. 7.
- ⁹ WHO, *The Right to Water*, 2003.



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