



Thousands march against water privatization during the World Water Forum in March 2006 in Mexico City.

Kevin Murray/UUSC

## Defending the right to water

In Bolivia, a “water war” erupted in the streets when the water rates in Cochabamba increased by 10-36 percent. A U.S. corporation, Bechtel, had won the bid for the 40-year water services concession and increased the water rates in all communities — including the poor neighborhoods. The services, however, deteriorated.

When Bolivia invoked the contract provision to cancel the concession for non-performance, Bechtel sued. In January 2006, the \$25 million suit was settled for 32 cents and legal fees.

Water rights activist Oscar Olivera said, “It was because of the movement against abuses of privatization in Bolivia and around the world that the Cochabamba case was settled. Let people know that this victory was won because the ‘tribunal of the people’ decided it — not the tribunal of the World Bank. This is the power of people.”



The human right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible, and affordable water for personal and domestic use.

**M**ore than one billion people around the world lack access to clean water. Vital sources of water are rapidly being polluted and depleted. Exploitation, growing populations, and contamination all contribute to water scarcity.

In many countries and cities, governments with inadequate resources to repair crumbling, substandard systems are turning to privatization for a solution. Unfortunately, privatization often leads to increased rates and water cutoffs for those who cannot afford to pay the higher rates.

Because women and girls in developing countries must get water for their families, lack of access to safe water and sanitation disproportionately affects women's lives. Water-related diseases are a human tragedy, killing up to five million people annually, preventing millions of people from leading healthy lives, and undermining development efforts. Half of all schools in the world do not have access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.



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Astonishingly, only 3-5 percent of water is used for "vital human needs" such as drinking and bathing. Most of the world's water is used by agriculture. An estimated 3,000 liters of water per person per day is required to produce our food — 1,000 times what we need for drinking.

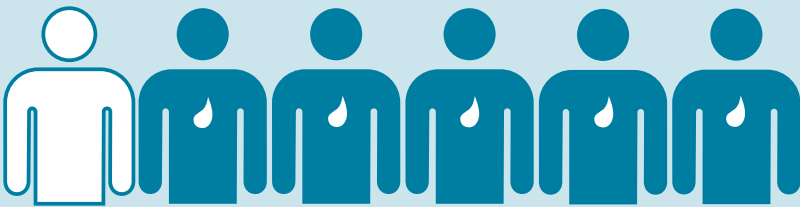
Around the world, people are beginning to assert that access to affordable, safe, and sufficient water is a human right. International human rights law requires governments to make their best efforts to provide water to their citizens and demands that they report on their progress.

In the past decade, Ethiopia, Gambia, South Africa, Uganda, Uruguay, and Zambia have adopted constitutional provisions acknowledging the human right to water. Bolivia has announced that its government will seek a constitutional provision.

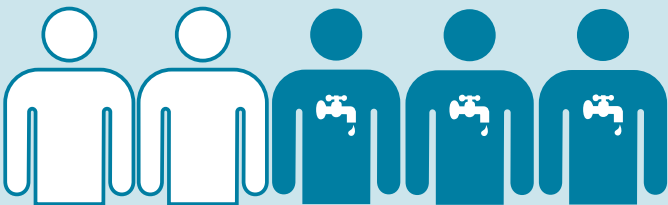
Financing water services remains the major challenge to this effort. One way to fund improvements in infrastructure is privatizing water services. But this path has led to difficulty in many countries.

Water photography on pages 1 and 3 courtesy of Timjen van Dobbenburgh

## Access to Safe Water and Basic Sanitation Services



One of every six people in the world lacks access to safe drinking water. That's over 1.1 BILLION PEOPLE globally.



Two of every five people in the world lack access to basic sanitation services. That's nearly 2.6 BILLION PEOPLE globally.

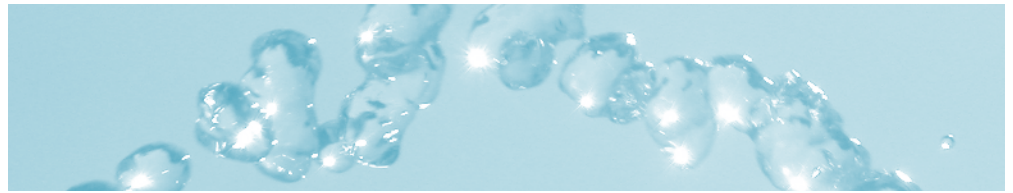
Source: WaterAid

## Water crisis

UUSC works with program partners to influence public policy in places where contamination, over-extraction, and climate change have depleted water resources. A critical problem facing indigenous communities in the United States and internationally is the contamination of surface and ground water by mining. Glamis Gold, the world's largest mining conglomerate, operates mines that are depleting water in Nevada as well as in Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. Water scarcity created by mining destroys small agriculture.

The Siria valley in Guatemala once was part of the country's "grain house." But now many families have to buy the majority of their basic staples, corn and beans, because of the effects of mining.

"We have been turned into consumers. We have been denied the right to subsist," said Martin Erazo president of the regional environmental committee.



## UUSC on the right to water

UUSC helps organizations around the world and in the United States to defend the right to water. Our work is guided by these beliefs:

- ◆ Water is a fundamental human right and must be provided equitably to all people regardless of gender, race, or class.
- ◆ Water is part of the global commons, not a commodity.
- ◆ Water democracy means that citizens, and especially those disadvantaged by race, class, or gender, must be involved in water management in their communities.
- ◆ Water conservation and stewardship must be a top priority.

Defending the human right to water, UUSC works against inappropriate privatization schemes and supports efforts to develop alternative water services models that meet the human right to water while promoting sustainable use of water resources.

By providing financial, technical, and political support, UUSC enables its program partners to enhance equitable access to safe and affordable water for all people independent of class, race, and gender. These are some of our program partners:

**Federation of Neighborhood Organizations in the City of El Alto, Bolivia (FEJUVE)**, is a nonpartisan, participatory, civic organization made up of 600 neighborhood councils that promote equality and social justice in El Alto,

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## Our water project

Democratic participation and citizen involvement in water services at all levels are critical to the promotion and protection of the human right to water. The city of Holyoke, Mass., has learned what the lack of democratic control can mean in a small community:

"Holyoke, Mass., has recently privatized the operation of our sewer treatment plant and much of the sewer operation.

"A number of us formed a group and called ourselves Holyoke Citizens for Open Government. We have been battling this here in Holyoke, but it seems the major battle was lost before we really even knew what was happening. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts passed special legislation that allowed the mayor to enter into this contract without city council or citizen approval. So the privatization has proceeded.

"By the way, Aquarion [Water Company] was the sole bidder on the contract."

— Ken Harstine, Holyoke Citizens for Open Government

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a suburb of La Paz. Sixty-eight percent of the people live below the poverty line in El Alto, and 45 percent have no access to potable water. FEJUVE's secretary general was recently appointed water minister of Bolivia.

**Federation of Unions of Water Workers in Peru (FENTAP)** is a democratic union organization established in 1981 to represent all water and sanitation workers in Peru. UUSC supports FENTAP's efforts to mobilize Peruvians to advocate for policies to modernize public water utilities and make them environmentally sound.

**Tanzania Gender Networking Program (TGNP)** promotes gender equality and social equity through the empowerment of women and other marginalized members of the community. UUSC supports TGNP's Water for the People Not for Profits project. A member of the Feminist Activism Coalition, TGNP researches the effects of water privatization on women.

**Massachusetts Global Action** is a statewide grass roots network and membership organization that helps communities challenge the negative effects of corporate globalization in the commonwealth. UUSC supports MGA's campaign "Our Communities, Our Water," which educates and empowers citizens to be proactive about their water services.



According to WaterAid, every 15 seconds a child dies of a water-related disease. That would be the equivalent of having 20 jumbo jets crash daily.

## What you can do to defend the human right to water

### Create awareness

Show the videos *Thirst* and/or *It's Our Water, Dam It* to your congregation or community group. Contact UUSC to borrow copies of these videos.

### Learn about your water!

- ◆ Find the source of your water. Where does it come from?
- ◆ Test the water in your home or congregation. Is it safe?
- ◆ Who makes decisions about the water in your community?
- ◆ What does your water bill pay for?
- ◆ What happens in your community if a family cannot pay the water bill?

### Take action

Become a UUSC Human Rights Defender by signing up on our website, [www.uusc.org/hrdefenders](http://www.uusc.org/hrdefenders). You will receive action alerts to support the human right to safe, affordable water.

### Turn yourself green

Consider becoming a Green Sanctuary under the UU Ministry for Earth program. Do a water audit! See [www.uuministryforearth.org](http://www.uuministryforearth.org) for details.

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These are just some of the things you can do to defend the right to water. For more information, visit [www.uusc.org/programs](http://www.uusc.org/programs).

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