



# Defending the RIGHT TO WATER



2007 Rebecca Brown/UUSC

*CAWP members paint a mural in Soweto during their successful campaign to uphold the constitutional right to water in South Africa. CAWP won a landmark decision in April 2008.*

## So that everyone has enough

The signs of global climate change are everywhere: melting glaciers, devastating droughts, and severe weather storms. Climatologists now say the effects of climate change are occurring sooner than they expected, with more severity and in unexpected places. This has worrying consequences for one of our planet's most precious resources: water.

In 2004, the United States Geological Survey announced that the U.S. government was "ill prepared" to handle a water crisis. Their prediction came true in 2007, when much of the Southeast suffered the most severe long-term drought since the Dust Bowl, creating an emergency so serious that some cities were just months away from running out of water.

While communities in the United States struggle to deal with the growing water crisis, in other countries, people are literally dying from lack of access to safe, affordable water. Around the world, 1.1 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water. Each year, dehydration from disease claims the lives of nearly 2 million children. In the last 10 years, it has killed more children than all the people lost to armed conflict since World War II.

Yet with the unequal distribution of water, the burden of limited water access is falling heaviest on the world's poor. The U.N. Development Program has labeled this phenomenon "water apartheid."

## What is the human right to water?

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

—General Comment 15,  
U.N. Committee on Economic,  
Social and Cultural Rights, 2002.

# Holding government accountable for violations

South Africa's 1996 constitution enshrines the human right to water for all South Africans. Yet in 2003, Johannesburg Water, the public water utility, began installing prepaid water meters in low-income black townships, but not in white areas. Set up in the front yard of each house, the meters shut off when a family hits a monthly limit of 1,585 gallons of free water.

This may seem like a lot of water, but for an average South African family of eight, it amounts to just half the amount set by the World Health Organization as necessary to meet basic human needs. In most cases, a 30-day supply lasts just 14 days, and few families can afford to pay for more water.

With UUSC's support, the Coalition Against Water Privatisation (CAWP) helped local residents file a suit against Johannesburg Water in the High Court of South Africa, charging violations of their constitutional rights to water and equality. They were successful!

In a landmark decision, the court found that Johannesburg Water had violated citizens' rights and ordered the utility to increase the free monthly water allotment. CAWP and local residents continue to work on the case as it goes through appeal, eventually to the Supreme Court of Appeal of South Africa. The final decision has important legal ramifications beyond South Africa for the human right to water.



Outside the High Court of South Africa, CAWP organizers speak out against the prepaid-water-meter system.

CAWP

## Water privatization: Prices go up, services go down

A family in Quezon City, Philippines, shows privatized water services do not reach their home.



Cash-strapped governments in countries around the world are turning to private water companies to purchase rundown water systems, upgrade, and sell services for profit. But in most cases of water privatization, prices rise and services deteriorate, leaving behind society's most vulnerable citizens who cannot afford to pay.

UUSC is supporting our partner Mi Cometa in Guayaquil, Ecuador, to challenge InterAgua, a subsidiary of the Bechtel corporation, to abide by Ecuador's national laws and international obligations and supply safe, affordable, and accessible water to the people of Guayaquil. UUSC also partners with the Asia Pacific Research Network (APRN) in the Philippines to challenge privatizations in Asia and develop alternate, people-centered water-service models.

UUSC partner Mi Cometa encourages youth education about, and participation in, water services in their community.



2007 Courtesy Mi Cometa

## Planning for climate change: Who pays the bill?

In 2007, UUSC program partner Massachusetts Global Action began a ground-breaking project, *The Color of Water*, to establish the right to water in the city of Boston. The project aims to empower citizens to push for a just water policy in the face of rising fees resulting from the pollution of water resources, increasing urbanization, and climate change.

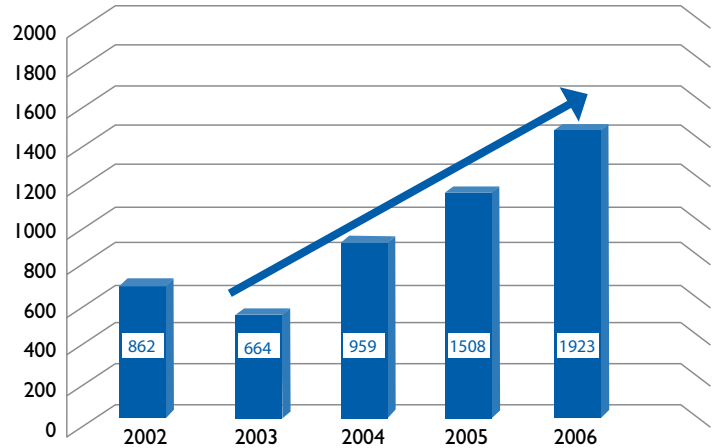
With the state's major water provider forecasting high debts to plan and deal with overdevelopment and global warming, UUSC is concerned that higher water bills will be passed on to those who can least afford to pay. Some families in Boston are already struggling, with the number of water shutoffs in the city nearly tripling since 2003.

With UUSC's help, Mass Global Action is challenging Boston to respect the human right to water, while strengthening this right locally, nationally, and internationally.

## Shareholder advocacy: The New Pepsi Challenge

UUSC is working with NorthStar Asset Management on a shareholder resolution requiring the soft-drink giant PepsiCo to adopt a human-right-to-water policy for all of its domestic and international operations. Current PepsiCo policy has led to irresponsible water-management and overuse, as well as contamination of local water resources, in communities around the

## Water Shutoffs in Boston, 2002-2006



Data collected by Massachusetts Global Action's *The Color of Water* project from the unpublished records of the Boston Water and Sewer Commission.

globe. Consider that PepsiCo uses 2.5 liters of water to produce just 1 liter of soda.

The impact of large-scale soda bottling has become widely known in relation to PepsiCo and Coca-Cola operations in India. Data collected in the town of Mehdiganj confirm that groundwater levels dropped up to 26 feet during the first seven years of Coca-Cola operations, from 1999 to 2006. Wells and hand water pumps in the vicinity have dried up, creating a crisis for Mehdiganj residents and local farmers who rely on groundwater to meet their daily water needs.

With UUSC's help, thousands of PepsiCo shareholders are learning about the human right to water, as we raise awareness of the environmental and social costs to investing in beverage giants like PepsiCo.

## Learn about your water!

- ◆ Find the source of your water. Where does it come from?
- ◆ Test the water in your home or office. 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 its water bill?

# Indigenous peoples' right to water

UUSC is supporting the Sipakapense people, an indigenous group in Guatemala, in their struggle to protect their access to safe, sufficient, and affordable water sources. They are confronting the contamination of their surface and ground water due to gold mining in their territory.

The Sipakapense community lives downstream from an open-pit gold mine run by GoldCorp, the largest mining corporation in the world. GoldCorp has been mining in the area since 1999, after purchasing a gold-mining license from the Guatemalan government

without the consent of the local indigenous group, in violation of national and international law.

After the Sipakapense community became concerned about the environmental impact of the mine, they held a community forum where 98.5 percent of participants voted to reject mining. Yet protests in Sipakapa have been repressed violently: in 2004, protestors were shot and killed by mining security and state police, and in 2007, community members were arrested and unjustly prosecuted for inciting violence.



2007 Patricia Jones/UUSC

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

- ◆ **Learn about water in your community.** Help pass a human-right-to-water policy so no one's water is shut off.
- ◆ **Create awareness.** Show films about the right to water, such as *A Drop of Life*; *FLOW: For Love Of Water*; *Thirst*; and *The Water Front*. Contact UUSC to borrow copies.
- ◆ **"Blue" your green** – make a human right to water a part of your environmental commitment. Become a Green Sanctuary under the UU Ministry for Earth program. Do a water audit!
- ◆ **Become a UUSC Human Rights Defender** so you can respond to action alerts in support of the human right to water.
- ◆ **Become a member of UUSC or renew your membership.**

For more information, visit our website [www.uusc.org/righttowater](http://www.uusc.org/righttowater) or write to [righttowater@uusc.org](mailto:righttowater@uusc.org).

*UUSC member and environmental expert Rob Robinson teaches Sipakapa residents how to conduct water-quality monitoring.*



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**Advancing human rights is the work of many joining hands**