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**Water Rights and Human Wrongs:
Understanding Water as a Human Right**

Wednesday, July 14, 2010, 9:00-10:30 am

Facilitator:

Nikhil Aziz, Executive Director, Grassroots International

Panelists:

Edith Garwood, Country Specialist for Israel, the Occupied;

Anil Naidoo, Project Organizer, Blue Planet Project;

Pablo Solon, Ambassador of Bolivia to the United Nations, New York



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Nikhil Aziz stated that the panel is a discussion about water and whether it is a right or a commodity. This issue is of real importance right now because of the relationship between the climate crisis and its impact on water. The water crisis – the issue of world's water resources meeting human demand – has been longstanding. Conflicts within and between states in regard to access to water have been occurring worldwide. It is difficult to position water as a right when there is growing pressure to commodify water. In the next few weeks, the UN General Assembly will meet to discuss a resolution on the right to water.

Aziz started the discussion with the audience by asking the following question: How might recognition at a national level encourage or influence the process of a UN resolution? One audience member responded: Government would try to settle conflict within the community in Uganda. I believe that if the UN takes a stance on the right to water, policy makers in Uganda would be affected in a positive way. Another audience member responded: I don't think that grantmakers would see water as a right. I would focus on the access to water for communities in South-East Asia and Sub Saharan Africa. In India, the drilling of water in producing Coca-Cola has resulted in wells of villages drying up and so water is definitely a right in this instance. Another example would be in India in which social factors block people to access water. This would be a case for a right to water.

Edith Garwood showed a video about the issues of water in Israel and the West Bank. Palestinians don't have access to water. Discharge of sewage has led to the water being unsanitary to drink. Construction of water infrastructure is in process to make the water sanitary. Farmers are having issues with irrigating their land. People have to bring water from wells from far distances. Israeli settlements have green areas and lawns while the Palestinian people live on dry land.

There has been a drought going on for seven years but this is not the reason why Palestinians don't have access. There are existing man-made policies that have been blocking access. The majority of Palestinians live in Area A and B, but Area C (where Palestinians are restricted from entering) in the West Bank is where transportation and access to water is available. Palestinians barely use 70 liters per capita a day. Some only use 20 liters per capita a day, which is the minimum standard acknowledged by the UN as adequate amount of water per day. In contrast, Israelis use over 300 liters of water per capita a day. 200,000 Palestinians are not hooked up to the water grid and sometimes their tap runs dry. The only option they have is to dig wells, but they need Israeli approval to do so and permission is rarely given. They usually have to buy bottled water from Israelis through Area C. Those in agricultural fields resort to selling their farm animals in order to buy water. There is also contamination of water that comes through the tap from fertilizers. Garwood stated that in this situation water should be a fundamental human right.

Aziz showed a film called "Blue Gold – Bolivia." The video discussed the private ownership of water in Bolivia by a transnational company from North America and Europe. As a result, the community rose up to protect their right to water. The army was sent to control local dissent. However, this administration was taken over by the movement.

Pablo Solon discussed the struggle to gain the right of access to their local water. (NO CONTEXT) The revenue now goes to the government and hopefully to the people and not transnational companies. He asked why water is not declared a human right even though without water *there is no right to life*. It has been discussed for 20-30 years and still there is no clear resolution. There are some concerns in the UN that once it becomes a right people will demand the right automatically. Some claim that it has to be a progressive right and there must be language to accommodate that. If declared a right then there is a limit on privatization. In the long run there will be an impact. It's even worse when corporations have money and access to water and those who are poor have no access. It is unacceptable and is a violation of the right to life.

Solon then commented on the difference between access to water and the right to water. He said that it is not about the capacity to get water but the right of everyone to have water. Solon stated that the UN will be taking a vote by the end of July. 192 countries will vote in favor or abstain on a resolution for the right to water and sanitation. Of 2.4 billion people in the world, 1/3 of those do not have sanitary water.

Anil Naidoo commented that water cuts across all the other human rights we fight for. He then discussed the issue of diarrhea amongst children. When you are in a village where there is no sanitary water, diarrhea is a deadly disease. The right to Mother Nature is written in constitutions in some countries. How can we include a human right that protects Mother Nature?

We all know that water is essential and is our connection to nature. In this country we don't realize how rich we are. The idea of water from a faucet is unfathomable by people in developing countries and other parts of the world. Science will not get us out of this situation. We have to start in the community. If the UN cannot recognize water as a right what does it say of its legitimacy as a body? Canada, US, UK and Australia are the countries fighting against the right to water. These are all areas where there is access to water. Countries of the South are to mobilize the global community. In one month we could see the fundamental failure of the UN system if the right to water is not recognized.

In India, scientists have been interacting with the community in order to meet sanitary standards for water. Scientists have been passing out materials and pamphlets to the community of how to sanitize their own water. It has changed the relationship of the community to water. He believes that the empowerment of women in the community will have a great impact on how we address issues regarding the right to water and sanitation.

Question and Answer:

Q: In countries where there is political oppression, community dissent will overturn the government over water. What do you see beside an overthrow of the government as an improvement in the issue of access to water?

A (Garwood): Water may or may not serve as a catalyst for community dissent but land and economic standing could also cause revolt. But there are three groups that can lead to improvements: International donors (avoid and don't address the issue appropriately); Palestinian authority could reserve water more effectively; and the Israeli government can remove restrictions on Palestinians.

A (Naidoo): In some countries, indigenous people have been planting trees and building aqueducts as a solution, but the national governments have been stopping their progress. Consequently, we lose customs and traditions of indigenous people where they become helpless or dependent.

Q: What are you up against in regard to the resolution in the UN system? Why are some Western countries opposing the right to water? It may be because corporate firms see this as a threat to their revenue if the UN acknowledges peoples right to water. Consequently water would no longer be commodified to such great an extent as now.

A (Naidoo): Core budgets are so small in the UN that it needs to focus on certain issues and not others. We have to find ways to support the UN, for example, through funding. The only way to help the global governments is if we, the people, show an interest in the issues that are being concerned by UN bodies.