The evolution of the right to water and sanitation: differentiating the implications

Obani, P.; Gupta, J.

DOI
10.1111/reel.12095

Publication date
2015

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Review of European, Comparative & International Environmental Law

Citation for published version (APA):
The Evolution of the Right to Water and Sanitation: Differentiating the Implications

Pedi Obani* and Joyeeta Gupta

Since 1980, the right to water has been seen mainly as implicitly subsumed under other social human and political rights. The global recognition of the need for access to sanitation services has led to formulations of a right to sanitation that emphasizes both the responsibilities of States and the rights of individuals. However, efforts to prioritize access to water and sanitation services have led to a gradual merger of these ideas in the human right to water and sanitation as adopted by the United Nations General Assembly and the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2010. Much of the literature on this subject focuses on water and sanitation simultaneously. This article fills a gap in knowledge by examining the different evolution of the human right(s) to water and sanitation at the international and national levels. It argues that the practical and social requirements for an environmentally sustainable and cost-effective implementation of access to water and sanitation are so different that, even if there is a combined right, the implementation may call for separating these two issues in some cases.

INTRODUCTION

It is increasingly clear that the right to water extends to the right to sanitation, as confirmed in the wording of the 2010 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)1 and United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolutions.2 As the right to water has received more research focus than the right to sanitation,3 this article focuses on the evolution of the combined right, and the similarities and differences between the water and sanitation components. It addresses whether access to water and sanitation should be implemented at the national level as a single right, or as two distinct rights, which require the adoption of different approaches. These issues have become increasingly relevant to policy makers and stakeholders who are struggling to assess how to implement the right to water and sanitation locally. Although the right to water and sanitation has been adopted internationally, it needs to be further articulated and implemented at the national level to benefit about 748 million and 2.5 billion people, respectively, who lack access to improved drinking water sources and adequate sanitation services.4 This article addresses these issues through a historical review of the relevant legal, policy and scientific literature.

The following sections cover the converging history of water and sanitation rights, illustrate the respective human rights standards for access to water and sanitation, and discuss the similarities and differences between access to water and sanitation.

EMERGENCE OF THE RIGHT TO WATER AND SANITATION

This section traces three pathways to the recognition of the right to water and sanitation at the international and national levels of governance: implicit recognition of the right to water, explicit recognition of the right to water or sanitation, and explicit recognition of an independent, but combined right to water and sanitation.

After the Second World War ended, human rights emerged from the United Nations system as a prominent international law approach for the protection of human life and the promotion of equitable development.5 The UN’s Economic and Social Council drafted

---

* Corresponding author. Email: pedi.obani@gmail.com.

1 The Human Right to Water and Sanitation (UNGA Resolution A/64/ 292, 3 August 2010).

2 UN Human Rights Council (HRC), Human Rights and Access to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation (UN Doc. A/HRC/RES/15/9, 6 October 2010).


4 UN, The Millennium Development Goals Report 2014 (UN, 2014). This is indicative of the extent of the sanitation challenge because the assessment does not cover other aspects of sanitation such as solid waste management, drainage, storm water management and access to hygiene.

5 The UN Charter was signed in order to promote and encourage respect for human rights, among other objectives. See Charter of the United Nations (San Francisco, 26 June 1945; in force 24 October 1945), Articles 1, 55 and 56. Human rights were also expressed in the Covenant of the League of Nations which the UN was designed to replace. See further R.B. Henig, The League of Nations (Barnes & Noble, 1973).
the ‘Declaration on the Essential Rights of Man’. This
gave rise to the legally binding International Covenant 
on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Interna-
tional Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural 
Rights (ICESCR).6

The ICESCR does not expressly recognize a right to 
water and sanitation. Nonetheless, some scholars 
suggest that the express mention of the rights to food, 
clothing and housing does not exclude other rights.7
Furthermore, some argue that the essential nature of 
water made it redundant to expressly mention it as a 
right,8 that water scarcity was not a concern at that 
time9 and that sanitation was not expressly mentioned 
because it is a taboo subject.10 Although it does not 
mention the issues, the ICESCR has nevertheless been 
the main legal basis for the recognition of water, and 
more recently sanitation, as human rights.

The human rights agenda initially included the right 
to water as subordinate to economic, social and cultural 
rights, such as the rights to food,11 adequate standard of 
living,12 adequate housing,13 health14 and develop-
ment.15 The recognition of water as a right subordinate 
to other economic, social and cultural rights posed 
three main challenges. First, the right to water became 
solely dependent on the recognition/violation of the 
primary right and the available remedies. Second, every 
State had a different set of obligations with respect to 
each primary right.16 Third, the quantity of water 
required for each of the primary rights varies. As a 
result, the recognition of the right to water was frag-
mented, and resulted in ineffectiveness and inconsis-
tency in enforcement.17

The confusion regarding the recognition of the right to 
winter led to the international recognition of the right to 
water as an independent right necessary for ensuring 
the rights under the ICESCR and other international 
instruments. This holistic approach, adopted in 
General Comment No. 15, ensured that the right to 
water was at the very least protected according to 
human rights standards.18 The General Comment 
clearly states that water ‘should be treated as a social 
and cultural good, and not primarily as an economic 
good. The manner of the realization of the right to water 
must also be sustainable, ensuring that the right can be 
realized for present and future generations’.19

General Comment No. 15 recognized the human right to 
winter, which ‘entitles everyone to sufficient, safe, 
acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water 
for personal and domestic uses’.20 However, it only did 
so in connection to the essential role of water for real-
izing other rights in the ICESCR.21 It elaborated on 
related issues such as the relationship between water 
and covenant rights,22 the normative content of the 
right to water,23 non-discrimination and equality,24 
obligations of State parties,25 violations,26 national 
implementation27 and the obligations of non-State 
actors.28 By implication, the right to water created 
the immediate obligations on States to take steps towards 
the full realization of the right, and to guarantee that 
the right will be exercised without discrimination. 
However, a State will not be held liable for violation of 
rights under the ICESCR where it is unable to meet its

---


9 I.T. Winkler, The Human Right to Water; Significance, Legal Status and Implications for Water Allocation (Hart, 2012).


12 ICESCR, n. 6 above, Article 11; General Comment No. 15, n. 11 above.

13 UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 4, The Right to Adequate Housing (Article 11 (1) of the Covenant) (UN Doc. E/1992/23, 13 December 1991) (‘General Comment No. 4’), at paragraph 8(b). 

14 UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 14, The Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health (Article 12 of the Covenant) (UN Doc. E/C.12/2000/4, 11 August 2000) (‘General Comment No. 14’), at paragraphs 11, 12 (a), (b) and (d), 15, 34, 36, 40, 43 and 51.


16 This distinction is evident in constitutional rights provisions at the national level. Within the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CAP. C23 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004), any person who alleges that any fundamental human right provision in Chapter 4 of the Constitution has been, is being or is likely to be violated in any State in relation to him may apply to a High Court in that State for redress. However, economic, social and cultural objectives enshrined in Chapter 2 of the Constitution are non-justiciable by virtue of Section 6.6(c) of the Constitution. By contrast, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act No. 108 of 1996) guarantees economic, social and cultural rights in the Bill of Rights enshrined in Chapter 2 of the Constitution.


18 Ibid.

19 General Comment No. 15, n. 11 above, at paragraph 11.

20 Ibid., at paragraph 2.

21 Ibid., at paragraphs 3, 6 and 7.

22 Ibid., at paragraphs 7–9.

23 Ibid., at paragraphs 10–12.

24 Ibid., at paragraphs 13–16.

25 Ibid., at paragraphs 17–38.

26 Ibid., at paragraphs 39–44.

27 Ibid., at paragraphs 45–59.

28 Ibid., at paragraph 60.
core obligations as a result of resource constraints, provided it shows that it has taken ‘deliberate, concrete and targeted’ steps ‘towards the full realization of the right to water’.\textsuperscript{29} General Comment No. 15 influenced the International Law Association’s (ILA) 2004 Berlin Rules on Water Resources. Article 17 of the Berlin Rules recognizes that: ‘Every individual has a right of access to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible, and affordable water to meet that individual’s vital human needs.’\textsuperscript{30}

In 2010, the UNGA adopted Resolution A/64/292 on the human right to water and sanitation, with 122 States voting in favour, none against and 41 abstentions.\textsuperscript{31} Among the abstaining States were major donors in the water sector such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Sweden, Japan, Ireland, Australia, Austria and the United States,\textsuperscript{32} as well as Kenya – a country that recognizes the right to water and sanitation in its Constitution. Some of the reasons for the abstentions question whether the human right to water forms part of customary international law yet.\textsuperscript{33} For example, the United States noted that the right to water and sanitation does not exist in a legal sense as described by the resolution. Similarly, the United Kingdom stated that ‘there was no sufficient legal basis for declaring or recognising water or sanitation as freestanding human rights, nor was there evidence that they existed in customary law’.\textsuperscript{34} Other States, such as Australia and Canada, abstained because there was no consensus on the right.\textsuperscript{35} That same year, the UN Human Rights Council adopted the ‘Human Right on Access to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation’ by consensus, affirming ‘that the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation is derived from the right to an adequate standard of living and inextricably related to the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, as well as the right to life and human dignity’.\textsuperscript{36} This led the then UN Independent Expert on human rights obligations related to access to safe drinking water and sanitation to declare that ‘it means that for the UN, the right to water and sanitation is contained in existing human rights treaties and is therefore legally binding’.\textsuperscript{37} Nevertheless, some States continue to question the legal status of the right.\textsuperscript{38}

In 2010, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights issued a statement on the right to sanitation,\textsuperscript{39} which reaffirmed, \textit{inter alia}, that the right is integrally related to the right to water, which the Committee had recognized in its General Comment No. 15.\textsuperscript{40} This is significant, because it was the first official recognition of the right to sanitation by the Committee. General Comment No. 15 had only recognized that adequate sanitation is fundamental for human dignity and privacy, and one of the principal mechanisms for protecting the quality of drinking water supplies and resources.\textsuperscript{41} Furthermore, one of the core obligations of States relating to the right to water in General Comment No. 15 was ‘[t]o take measures to prevent, treat and control diseases linked to water, in particular ensuring access to adequate sanitation’.\textsuperscript{42} These provisions highlight the importance of sanitation for human dignity and privacy, as well as the protection of water resources, but still fall short of an official recognition of the right to sanitation within General Comment No. 15.

In addition to these developments in human rights law, various international conferences since the 1970s have also made declarations on the right to water and sanitation.\textsuperscript{43} The right to water was affirmed in the Action Plan on ‘Community Water Supply’ issued by the Mar del Plata Conference in Argentina in 1977,\textsuperscript{44} and in Agenda

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., at paragraph 17.
\textsuperscript{31} UNGA Resolution A/64/292, n. 1 above.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} UN HRC, n. 2 above, at paragraph 3.

© 2014 John Wiley & Sons Ltd
Social activists advocate that the concept of water as an economic good must be limited by human rights standards so that access is not determined solely by market forces without regard to the needs of the poor, vulnerable and marginalized. Consequently, many communities, particularly in Latin America, Africa and Asia, promoted the recognition of their right to water in their struggles to maintain access to traditional water sources and improve the quantity and quality of affordable services for their basic needs. On the other hand, the proposed justification for full cost recovery is that privatization is necessary for a stable and financially sustainable service delivery because States may be unable to afford the cost of infrastructure and maintenance. The negative impacts of full cost recovery on some poor and marginalized communities gave impetus to the calls for the recognition of water and sanitation as human rights. Human rights law does not specify any model for delivering basic services, but its norms cover the regulation, monitoring and oversight of private providers.

The legal status of the human right to water and sanitation is not yet settled, although the scholarly community is convinced that the right is legally binding; jurisprudence on this subject is still forthcoming, however. It is possible that the right is seen as a derivative right or as independent. However, where it is derived from other economic, social and cultural rights, the human right to water and sanitation naturally assumes the legal status of the primary right. In the case of independent recognition, the legal status would flow directly from the language and character of the source of the right, such as a treaty or court judgement. Nonetheless, the human right to water and sanitation has arguably evolved into customary international law, based on evidence of State practice and opinio juris. For instance, evidence of State practice exists in various judicial decisions and national constitutions and laws. Furthermore, the reservations expressed by developed States (e.g., Netherlands and the United Kingdom) that abstained from the UNGA votes were mostly on the grounds of the substance of the proposed right and the procedure adopted, but not because they did not recognize the right in practice.

**PATHWAYS TO THE RECOGNITION OF THE RIGHT TO WATER AND SANITATION**


56 See generally Statute of the International Court of Justice (San Francisco, 26 June 1945; in force 24 October 1945), Article 38(b)–(c); and H.W.A. Thirlway, *The Sources of International Law* (Oxford University Press, 2014).


---


52 See S.L. Muthy, n. 10 above.

53 This is why international financial institutions such as the World Bank impose privatization as a major lending condition. However, privatization is still a very controversial model and the support for it is not universal. See E.K. Bluemel, n. 17 above; and S. Grusky, “Privatization Tidal Wave: IMF/World Bank Water Policies and the Price Paid by the Poor”, 22:5 *Multinational Monitor* (2001), 14; M. Barlow, n. 50 above.

TABLE 1 IMPLICIT RECOGNITION OF THE HUMAN RIGHT TO WATER AND SANITATION AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>SOURCE</th>
<th>LEGAL STATUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Universal Declaration on Human Rights (D)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (C)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>European Social Charter (RHI)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (C)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (C)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>American Convention on Human Rights (C)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Stockholm Declaration (D)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Protocols Additional to the Geneva Conventions (I &amp; II) (D)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (RHI)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (C)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>UN Principles for Older Persons (D)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Rio Declaration (D)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>UNGA Resolution 45/94 (R)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>European Social Charter (revised) (RHI)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>UN Watercourses Convention (C)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>UNECE Protocol on Water and Health to the 1992 Watercourses Convention (RHI)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (D)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: GC = General Comment; D = Declaration; R = Resolution; C = Convention/Covenant; RHI = Regional Human Rights Instrument; B = binding; NB = non-binding.

For this purpose, the recognition of the right to water is taken to imply the right to sanitation, because sanitation is an essential aspect of fulfilling the right to water through treating wastewater and preventing the pollution of water sources.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNGA Resolution 217 A (III), 10 December 1948), Articles 3, 7 and 25. Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in itself is not legally binding, its provisions are widely accepted as fundamental norms of human rights; the declaration also forms part of the International Bill of Human Rights, found at: <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FactSheet2Rev.1en.pdf>.


European Social Charter (Strasbourg, 3May 1996; in force 1 July 1999), Articles 11, and 13.

ICPR, n. 6 above, Articles 1.2, 2.1, 6.1, 17.1–2 and 26.

ICESCR, n. 6 above, Articles 1.2, 2.1, 11 and 12.

American Convention on Human Rights (San Jose, 22 November 1969; in force 18 July 1978), Article 26. The American Convention on Human Rights is binding on all its signatories, while the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, 1948, is still applied to the States that have not yet joined the American Convention. See <http://www.hrea.org/index.php?base_id=150>.


Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I) (Geneva, 8 June 1977; in force 7 December 1978), Articles, 55, 69 and 70; Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II) (Geneva, 8 June 1977; in force 7 December 1978), Article 18.


Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention, C107 (Geneva, 26 June 1957; in force 2 June 1959), Article 2.


Need to Ensure a Healthy Environment for the Well-being of Individuals (UNGA Resolution A/RES/45/94, 14 December 1990), at 1.

European Social Charter, n. 62 above, Article 31.


© 2014 John Wiley & Sons Ltd
TABLE 2 EXPLICIT RECOGNITION OF THE HUMAN RIGHT TO WATER AND SANITATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>SOURCE</th>
<th>LEGAL STATUS</th>
<th>EXPLICIT RECOGNITION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>BINDING</td>
<td>NON-BINDING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>Geneva Conventions (III and IV)(^{77}) (C)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Mar del Plata Declaration(^{78}) (D)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women(^{79}) (C)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Convention on the Rights of the Child(^{80}) (C)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child(^{81}) (RHI)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Agenda 21(^{82})</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Dublin Statement(^{83}) (D)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Recommendation (2001) 14 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the European Charter on Water Resources(^{85}) (D)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>General Comment No. 15(^{86}) (GC)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights(^{87}) (R)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Abuja Declaration(^{88}) (D)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Message from Beppu, First Asia-Pacific Water Summit(^{89}) (D)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Delhi Declaration(^{90}) (D)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>UN Human Rights Council Resolution 15/9(^{92}) (R)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

water or the right to sanitation; and explicit recognition of a combined right to water and sanitation (see Table 2). Implicit recognition is inferred from provisions which indirectly support or accommodate the existence of a right to water and sanitation. Explicit recognition is expressed through direct provisions that affirm the existence of a right to water and/or sanitation.

Table 1 shows the evolution of the use of the right to water and sanitation in different binding or non-binding international instruments.


\(^{78}\) Mar del Plata Declaration, n. 44 above, at preamble.

\(^{79}\) CRC, n. 41 above, Articles 24.1 and 24.2(c).


\(^{82}\) Agenda 21, n. 45 above, Chapter 18.47.

\(^{83}\) Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development, n. 46 above, Principle 4.


\(^{86}\) General Comment No. 15, n. 11 above, at paragraph 12.


\(^{88}\) Abuja Declaration, First Africa-South America Summit (26–30 November 2006 Abuja, Nigeria), at paragraph 18.


\(^{90}\) The Delhi Declaration, The Third South Asian Conference on Sanitation (SACOSAN) ‘Sanitation for Dignity and Health’ (16–21 November 2008, Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi, India), found at: <http://www.ehu.es/ceinik/tratados%22-TRATADOSOBREELAAGUA%5 C233Derechohumanoagualga%5CTA2234ING.pdf>, at paragraph 1.

\(^{91}\) UNGA Resolution A/64/292, n. 1 above, at paragraph 1.

\(^{92}\) UN HRC, n. 2 above, at paragraph 3.
non-binding legal documents. The fact that not all the provisions on the right to water and sanitation in international instruments are legally binding contributes to the uncertainty over the status of the right. In addition to implicit or explicit recognition, the source should also have a binding effect on the State in order to have a legal effect. The implicit recognition of the right to water and sanitation can create much broader obligations on States than expressly recognizing a right to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation. Under the right to food, it would be necessary to provide equitable access to water and water management systems, including sustainable rain harvesting and irrigation technology. Similarly, environmental hygiene, under the right to health, would require the protection of natural water resources from contamination. Furthermore, explicit provisions (Table 2) can also be open to diverse interpretations; the specific quantitative and qualitative requirements for realizing the human right to water and sanitation are contextual.

International law provisions are important for the realization of the right to water and sanitation; such provisions apply to the regulation and management of domestic waters and place a duty on States not to use their resources in a way that causes harm outside their territories. This brief overview of international law reveals a growing consensus to address lack of access to water and sanitation services through the human rights approach. This is dependent on the interpretation of the legal status of the instruments, as well as the wording in the various sources. The human rights obligation for States prohibits them from interfering with the realization of the rights outside their jurisdictions. Although the obligation for respecting, protecting and fulfilling the right to water and sanitation lies directly with States, there are corresponding obligations imposed on non-State actors and relevant UN agencies to promote the mainstreaming of the human right to water and sanitation in their agendas. The international right to water and sanitation could therefore strengthen the claims of rights holders.

59 General Comments are not legally binding, but they carry significant legal weight because there is no other authoritative body or procedure available to resolve questions over the interpretation of the ICESCR provisions. See M. Craven, n. 7 above, at 91; and S.M.A. Salman and S. McInerny-Lankford, The Human Right to Water Legal and Policy Dimensions (World Bank, 2004). Declarations and recommendations generally reflect intent, but do not create a legally binding duty on States. Resolutions are not legally binding, with the exception of resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council, but they may affirm customary international legal principles or reflect emerging principles of international law. Resolutions could also indicate the commitment of States to the realization of the contents. See Centre for Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), Source No. 8: Legal Resources for the Right to Water – International and National Standards (COHRE, 2003). Conventions and covenants are legally binding instruments for States that have ratified or acceded to them once they enter into force. Otherwise, their provisions can also become binding on States generally upon becoming part of customary international law norms. Regional human rights treaties are adopted by States from a particular region and are legally binding on State parties. In this regard, the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Helsinki, 17 March 1992; in force 6 October 1996), the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (Espoo, 25 February 1991; in force 10 September 1997) and its the Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment (Kiev, 21 May 2003; in force 11 July 2010) are unique because countries outside the UN Economic Commission for Europe region are now able to join these conventions.

60 General Comment No. 15, n. 11 above, at paragraph 7. See also UN Watercourses Convention, n. 74 above, Articles 5–7 and 10, which states that in determining ‘vital human needs… special attention is to be paid to providing sufficient water to sustain human life, including both drinking water and water required for production of food in order to prevent starvation’. Ibid., Article 10.

61 General Comment No. 15, n. 11 above, at paragraph 8.


63 See, e.g., Socio-economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) v. Federal Republic of Nigeria and Universal Basic Education Commission, ECW/C/CCJAPP/0808 (ECOWAS, 27 October 2009). Victims may also refer their cases to the International Criminal Court if such may violations constitute crimes against humanity, genocide or war crimes, and if the national courts are either unwilling or unable to investigate and prosecute the cases. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Rome, 17 July 1998; in force 1 July 2002) defines crimes against humanity to include extermination; and it defines extermination to include ‘the intentional infliction of conditions of life, inter alia the deprivation of access to food and medicine, calculated to bring about the destruction of ‘part of a population’. Ibid., Article 7.1(b), 7.2(b). Article 8.2(b)(xxv) defines war crimes to include: “[I]ntentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival, including wilfully impeding relief supplies as provided for under the Geneva Conventions.”
human right to water and sanitation also promotes monitoring and evaluation.104

THE NATIONAL LEVEL

States have been guided by international law provisions to formulate the measures for the realization of the right to water and sanitation within their territories. However, national provisions may differ from international provisions. For instance, the United Kingdom recognizes the rights to water and sanitation as elements of the right to an adequate standard of living,105 but it does not recognize them as independent customary international law rights or as being derived from the right to life.106

A review of national constitutions shows more instances of the explicit recognition of the right to water, unlike the right to sanitation (see Table 3). The right to water and sanitation, however, is not expressly recognized in any national constitution within Europe. Hence, all the examples in Table 3 are drawn from Africa, Asia, (Latin) America and Oceania. As well as through constitutional provisions, the right to water and sanitation has also been expressly recognized through other national laws. For instance, in France the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>NATIONAL CONSTITUTION</th>
<th>RIGHT TO WATER</th>
<th>RIGHT TO SANITATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>Mexico*107</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Uruguay*108</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Uganda109</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>South Africa110</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Nicaragua*111</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Democratic Republic of Congo*112</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Ecuador*113</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Maldives114</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Bolivia*</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Kenya115</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Niger116</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Morocco*117</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Somalia118</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Zimbabwe119</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Tunisia120</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *Unofficial translation.

104 The practice of monitoring and evaluation is useful for the increased transparency and improved performance of programmes as it can help identify trends, evaluate changes and capture knowledge. See <http://www.mdgfund.org/content/monitoringandevaluation>.
106 Ibid.
107 Constitution of the United Mexican States (as amended), Article 4.
108 Uruguayan Constitution, 1967 (as amended), Article 47.
109 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda (as at 15 February 2006), Articles XIV(b) and XXI.
110 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, n. 16 above, Articles 27.1(b) and 27.2.
114 Functional Translation of the Constitution of the Republic of Maldives, 2008, Articles 23(a) and 23(f).
115 Constitution of Kenya, 2010, Articles 43.1(b) and 43.1(d).
119 Constitution of Zimbabwe, Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013, Section 77(a).
law on water and the aquatic environment recognizes
the right to water under favourable economic condi-
tions.121 However, national law provisions, apart from
national constitutions, are not covered within the scope
of this study.

GREATER PRIORITY TO THE
RIGHT TO WATER THAN THE
RIGHT TO SANITATION

This section briefly explains the normative content of
the right to water and sanitation, and shows evidence of
the incorporation of the norms in national laws. Access
to both water and sanitation has increasingly been pri-
oritized in law and policy, but historically there has
been more emphasis on water issues than sanitation.
For instance, the Millennium Development Goals
(MDGs) first contained a target on improving access to
improved water sources. It was only in 2002 during the
World Summit on Sustainable Development that a
sanitation target was introduced. Similarly, the Eco-
nomic and Social Council Rights recognized the right
to water in General Comment No. 15 in 2003; it was only
in 2010 that it also issued a statement on the right to
sanitation.122 At the national level, constitutions have
also focused more on the right to water.

There are parameters for measuring the progressive
realization of access to water and sanitation; the World
Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF Joint Moni-
toring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation
technology ladder focuses on the technology for sepa-
rating excrement from human contact,123 and the pro-
fosned function-based ‘sanitation ladder’ focuses more
on the functional value and environmental impacts of
sanitation solutions.124 The normative content of the
right to water and sanitation specified in General
Comment No. 15 includes safety, affordability, accessi-
bility and acceptability.

Safety requires that the water available for personal
or domestic use must be devoid of micro-organisms,
chemical substances and radiological hazards that
constitute health risks.125 The colour, odour and taste of the
water must also be acceptable for each personal or
domestic use.126 Sanitation facilities must ensure the
hygienic separation of human excreta and other types of
waste from human, animal and insect contact; water for
personal hygiene; and safe disposal of wastewater,
excreta and menstrual products.127 The design of the
facilities and maintenance must ensure physical
safety128 and privacy.129

The cost of accessing water and sanitation must be
affordable.130 The direct and indirect costs131 of water
and sanitation facilities must not compromise the well
being of users.132 However, the human right to water
and sanitation does not specify any amount that would
be considered affordable, as this is contextual.133 The
WHO recommends a threshold of 3% of household
income for water services, but it is not clear whether
this also includes expenditure on both water and sani-
tation. Other recommendations range between 3% and
6% of household income.134 In addition to the theoreti-
cal complexities,135 measuring affordability as a per-
centage of household income will not apply to rural
economies in developing countries, which may rely on
non-monetary forms of payment like labour
exchange.136 Generally, affordability requires the use of
subsidies and other economic instruments to secure
access for the poor.137

Availability means access to sufficient water and sani-
tation services. Water supply should also be continu-
ous. This has been quantified by the UN Development
Programme as at least 20 litres of clean water per
person daily, including the poor who cannot pay.138

| 122 | See Sanitation Statement, n. 39 above. |
| 126 | General Comment No. 15, n. 11 above, at paragraph 12(b). |
| 128 | Ibid., at paragraph 73. |
| 131 | Indirect costs could include the construction and maintenance of facilities, as well as emptying of facilities in the case of sanitation. |
| 132 | See Report of the Independent Expert, n. 127 above, at paragraph 77; General Comment No. 15, n. 11 above, at paragraph 12(c)(ii). |
| 135 | See C. Fonseca, n. 130 above. |
| 136 | See COHRE et al., n. 134 above. |
There is no similar quantitative guideline set for sanitation at the international level because it is highly contextual. It is, however, important to minimize users’ waiting times. Sanitation is narrowly defined under the rights approach ‘as a system for the collection, transport, treatment and disposal or reuse of human excreta and associated hygiene’. This definition is restrictive because it largely depends on the prevalent technical definition of sanitation systems— that is, ‘all the technical appliances necessary for a safe use and handling of water from the water user (e.g., households, agriculture, industry) over the collection, treatment and reuse of wastewater’.

An example of this technical definition is also contained in the Lagos State (Nigeria) water sector law, which states that sewerage works ‘means the whole system of sewers sewage treatment plant, tanks, silos, pumps, valves, meters and channels, other appurtenances for the purpose of conveying of sewage and storm water and the treatment of sewage or both’. The emphasis on systems does not expressly oblige States to provide services especially for those who are unable to afford same without some form of support. In South Africa, the constitution mentions domestic wastewater and sewage disposal under the sanitation services functions of the local government. This is significant because without water and sanitation services, end users cannot access the benefits of the available systems.

Water and sanitation must be universally accessible. Physically, water must be accessible within or in the immediate vicinity of households. The WHO recommends water supply through multiple taps, continuously, and not further than 100 metres from the home. Accessibility also requires a safe location, culture and gender sensitivity, non-discrimination and privacy. Some cultures may require separate facilities for women and girls in public places, or special facilities for hygiene practices like hand washing, and genital and anal cleansing. The right to seek, receive and impart information is also an aspect of accessibility; individuals and groups should be given full and equal access to information held by public authorities or third parties concerning water and sanitation services and the environment.

It is important for national laws and policy provisions to specify the quantitative and qualitative requirements for safety, affordability, accessibility and acceptability based on the local contexts. States should establish strong administrative, legal and political mechanisms, as well as judicial mechanisms for addressing consumers’ complaints and to ensure equity, compliance and accountability by the service providers. Marginalized groups should be encouraged to actively participate in the decision-making processes. Furthermore, sustainable customary water use practices and water rights of indigenous communities should be protected to enable them to realize their right to water and sanitation.

There are examples of national laws and judicial decisions on the normative content of the right to water and sanitation. For safety, the United States requires large water systems and states to report annually on incidents of water contamination, and violations of...
national drinking water regulations. On accessibility, in Mazibuko and Others v. City of Johannesburg and Others, South Africa’s Constitutional Court held that Johannesburg’s free basic water policy of 25 litres per person daily in the poor suburb of Phiri was reasonable. The court also held that the use of prepaid water metres was lawful. In Argentina, in Marchisio José Bautista y Otros Case, the District Court ordered the municipality to provide 200 litres of safe drinking water per household daily until full access to the public water services was restored. In Paraguay, in Sauhoyamaxa Indigenous Community, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ordered the government to set up sanitation facilities in the community’s settlements and ensure the supply of sufficient drinking water to the members of the community until their traditional lands were restored. In the United Kingdom, it is a legal requirement that there should be at least one toilet and wash basin for every ten pupils under five years and for every 20 pupils over five years in schools; as well as one toilet for every ten students in special schools, irrespective of age.

In New Zealand, the Local Government Act specifically requires a local authority contemplating partnering with the private sector to develop a formal policy on how to assess, monitor and report on the contributions of the partnership to the wellbeing of the community outcomes; the duration of water services contracts must not exceed 15 years, and the authority has a duty to control pricing. In the Flemish region of Belgium, residents are required to pay a basic connection fee for the free supply of a minimum quantity of water per person, and additional amounts consumed are priced separately. This ensures that basic water needs of residents are met. The foregoing illustrations, in addition to the country constitutions mentioned in Table 3, show relevant examples of the progressive development of the normative content of the right to water and sanitation in various countries, but also point to more developments in the area of water.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE RIGHTS

This section explores the similarities and differences between the water and sanitation components of the combined right to water and sanitation. The right to water and sanitation are similar to the extent that both: (i) promote human dignity and support the realization of other human rights, as well as the MDGs; (ii) require infrastructural investments; (iii) are linked to poverty and vulnerability; and (iv) are public merit goods, meaning that lack of access has negative impacts on the general population. These similarities could be seen as necessitating the integration of the right to water and sanitation at the policy level and in implementation.

However, there are also important differences in the cultural perceptions, costs and technical requirements related to water and sanitation provision. Access to water is openly demanded. Sanitation, on the other hand, is generally a taboo subject, making its demand latent; in countries like Madagascar, toilets are not even allowed inside private houses or lands. While there are no alternatives to safe drinking water con-

155 This leads to sustainable outcomes. For instance, it was reported in 2010 that following community meetings and recommendations based on human rights standards that were made to the Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company, the company adopted a policy to extend water supply to informal settlements in Kenya. See OHCHR et al., n. 152 above.

156 Mazibuko and Others v. City of Johannesburg and Others (CCT 39/09) [2009] ZACC 28; 2010 (5) BCLR 239 (CC); 2010 (4) SA 1 (CC).

157 Ciudad de Córdoba, Primera Instancia y 8 Nominación en lo Civil y Comercial, Marchisio José Bautista y Otros, Acción de Amparo (Expte. No. 500003/36).

158 Inter-American Court of Human Rights 29 March 2006, Case of the Sauhoyamaxa Indigenous Community v. Paraguay, Merts, reparations and costs, IACHR Series C No 146, IHRIL 1530 (IACHR 2006).

159 Education (School Premises) Regulations, n. 140 above.

160 See OHCHR et al., n. 152 above.

sumption, open defecation is an (unhygienic) alternative to improved sanitation services and may even be desirable as part of social interactions in some communities. The result is a low demand for improved sanitation services and the perception that the right is imposed or of low priority. Further, toilets require more intensive maintenance compared to water facilities and many cultures are averse to using dirty facilities. Drinking water is potable, while sanitation facilities are often stationary, which leads to absenteeism by girls in schools without adequate sanitation. The cost of drinking water provision is less than that of sanitation (and also depends on the technologies used), but the returns on investment assessed in benefit-cost ratios are higher for sanitation.

The differences between water supply and sanitation might partly explain why there has been more progress with the provision of access to water than access to sanitation services and sanitation has often been submerged under water issues. Even before the end of the ‘Water for Life’ decade and a successful assessment of the outcomes, attention is already steadily shifting away to the water, food and energy nexus. Sanitation is equally crucial to water quality, and waste from sanitation can be re-used in food production or energy generation. This reality underscores the need to recognize the distinct and equally important sanitation aspect when implementing the right to water and sanitation, while considering the financial and environmental costs of alternative infrastructure options.

**CONCLUSION**

This article has provided an overview of the evolution of the human right to water and sanitation at the global and national levels, and discussed the similarities and differences between the two aspects of the combined right to water and sanitation. It has shown the disparity in the degree of attention on the water and the sanitation aspect of the right. Although from an environmental perspective it may make sense to combine both at the policy level, there are fundamental social, economic and technological differences between access to water and access to sanitation services that need to be considered during implementation.

This raises the question whether water and sanitation should be two separate rights, especially at the national level, where many States are still in the process of implementing the international right. This is a complex issue, because from a merit goods perspective it is essential to resolve sanitation issues to limit negative effects on society. From a policy perspective, the right to sanitation can benefit from the popularity of the right to water, provided it receives the necessary focus and resources for its realization. However, financial issues are not negligible. Providing water and sanitation simultaneously may increase the short-term costs, and possibly reduce the attention given to alternative sanitation solutions that may require less water, especially in water insecure regions. Nonetheless, from an environmental and social perspective, the integration of water and sanitation provision has the potential to yield significant returns over time, and to improve efficiency through resource recovery from the process.

In either case – that is, whether the provision of water and sanitation is pursued separately or together – there is a need to manage water resources, finances and human operations efficiently to minimize wastage. Furthermore, there is a need for education and open discussions with stakeholders about the impacts of poor sanitation as a way of strengthening demand for...
sustainable sanitation solutions. There should also be greater emphasis on the maintenance of available infrastructure. The actual cost of water and sanitation provision is highly context-specific, and the cost of retrofitting to include sanitation infrastructure in the future could also be higher. This calls for further investigation of the actual costs of water and sanitation provision in relation to ensuring human rights requirements for safety, affordability, accessibility and acceptability.