**Latin America: Why There's a Water Crisis in the Most Water-Rich Region**

*By* [*Bart Beeson*](http://www.alternet.org/authors/bart-beeson)***May 1, 2008***

The 16th commemoration of World Water Day came and went in March with little fanfare. Francisco, a retired construction worker in El Salvador, didn't have much to celebrate anyway. When I spoke with him on the poor outskirts of San Salvador last December, water had not come out of his faucets for months. Despite making minimum wage, or about $161 a month, he still dutifully pays his $7 dollar water bill every month. "I keep paying the bill, because if my service is disconnected, then I'll have to pay even more to get it reconnected," he reasons.  
  
Until the water company decides to fix the neighborhood's water pump, Francisco and his neighbors not only pay a useless water bill, but they are also forced to buy barrels of water from a tanker truck for an additional $1.50. "We don't have any other choice," he explains. "We have to have water."  
  
Water troubles like Francisco's are common throughout Latin America, but the region's citizens are increasingly joining together to do something about it, channeling their frustration into action. Social organizing around water rights is not new in Latin America, but with growing problems of access and contamination, these movements have gained greater urgency, strength, and focus.  
  
One of the most famous victories of this growing upsurge occurred in Uruguay, where organizations successfully organized a national referendum on water rights. In 2004, the Uruguayan government's negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) threatened to put the water system under private management. **But the citizens' campaign forced the government to adopt a Constitutional amendment guaranteeing management would remain in the hands of the state and declaring water access a human right.** Similar amendment efforts on the right to water have now emerged in Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, and Mexico.  
  
**The Problem With Water**  
The state of the current world water crisis is well documented: **1.2 billion people are without access to safe water, 2.6 billion are without access to sanitation, and nearly 2 million children die every year because they don't have access to an adequate supply of clean water.**  
  
With the most annual rainfall of any region in the world, the water crisis in Latin America is particularly perplexing. Latin American countries face many of the same problems as countries with chronic fresh water shortages. **And less than 20 percent have access to adequate sanitation systems.**  
So why do so many people lack access to clean water, when water abounds in the region? In 2006, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) reported the answer clearly: **"The scarcity at the heart of the global water crisis is rooted in power, poverty and inequality, not in physical availability."**  
  
And since Latin America has one of the most inequitable income distribution rates in the world, water access in the region is equally skewed. What's more, a 2006 World Bank study shows average water bills in Latin America are the highest of all regions in the developing world.  
  
Poor people bear the brunt of problems associated with water contamination and "scarcity." Additional studies have found the poor pay more for clean water, spend more time and effort collecting water, and are much more likely to suffer health problems from contaminated water.  
  
The UNDP report adds, "People suffering the most from the water and sanitation crisis -- **poor people in general and poor women in particular -- often lack the political voice needed to assert their claims to water."** Yet the water movements brewing in Latin America are beginning to make their collective political voice heard.

**Movements: Turning the Tide?**  
Water activists hope building national and regional movements will help protect and preserve water resources for future generations. Juan Camilo Mira works for an organization called Ecofondo in Colombia. Mira and his partners have organized a nationwide campaign to hold a national referendum on the right to water.  
Soliciting a national referendum on water from the Colombian congress involves collecting nearly 1.5 million signatures over the next six months. The proposal calls for a constitutional amendment that would legally enshrine the fundamental right to potable water, a minimum amount of free water, the public and non-transferable management of water, and the special protection of ecosystems essential to the water cycle.  
  
Juan Camilo Mira knows it's an uphill battle, but he is confident water issues have the power to bring diverse groups together. "Through water, many organizations that had never been able to come to a political agreement before, have done so now," says Mira. "**Water is such a basic necessity, it makes it easy for people to agree on what needs to be done."**  
Claudia Campero, a member of the Coalition of Mexican Organizations for the Right to Water (COMDA), agrees: "There are a lot of diverse struggles going on here in Mexico, and water really helps us see what we have in common." COMDA spearheads Mexican efforts for a constitutional right to water.  
  
In October 2007, at least 25,000 people marched in El Salvador in defense of the right to water and against water privatization. It was one of the biggest demonstrations since the signing of the country's 1992 peace accords.  
  
The array of organizations participating in the march was striking: from women's groups to industry unions, and from environmental organizations to sex workers. The march marked the launch of the Blue Democracy campaign, an agglomeration of roughly 125 Salvadoran civil society organizations calling for increased investment in the water sector, a national water law, and a constitutional amendment on the right to water.  
  
**"That's the thing about water," says Ana Ella GÃ³mez, one of the coordinators of the campaign in El Salvador. "It doesn't matter who you are, how old you are, or how much you make: without water you die."**

**Beyond the Amendments**  
Advocates of the referendums say establishing a constitutional right to water will provide a legal foundation for holding local governments accountable for water access. The amendments also seek to keep water management out of the private sector, which has a history of exponential rate hikes and reducing services to maintain profit margins.  
  
Despite the widely "touted" success in Uruguay, many groups say making water a constitutional human right is not enough. Organizers of the Uruguayan referendum have even said the success of their initiative has had a greater impact internationally than nationally.  
  
Citing the case in Mexico, Claudia Campero warns, "There are a lot of things that are already written in [the Mexican] Constitution that remain unfulfilled in everyday life." But campaigning for a constitutional water reform is not the only objective. "It's a way of strengthening the water movement in Mexico, of bringing together all the diverse struggles in the country around one common theme," adds Campero.  
  
Indeed, none of the campaign organizers believe a constitutional amendment is a silver bullet for their country's water woes. But by building national movements advocating water rights, they hope the process itself will encourage citizen participation and hold governments accountable, while protecting a vital resource. As Ana Ella GÃ³mez puts it, "If we can't agree on the importance of water, what can we agree on?"  
  
Fierce protests in Latin America -- and even wars around the world -- show water can be a frequent source of conflict. But many of those in Latin America's water movements actually see it as a source of hope.