

Statement before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

***“REALIZING THE RIGHT TO SAFE WATER AND
SANITATION”***

A Statement by

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March 3, 2011

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Realizing the Right to Safe Water and Sanitation

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Chairman Wolf and Chairman McGovern, It is an honor to be here today at this hearing on “Realizing the Right to Safe Water and Sanitation”. Thank you for the opportunity to share with you and the Committee some thoughts and recommendations regarding global water and sanitation challenges in light of the recent recognition at the United Nations that access to water and sanitation are human rights.

First, let me outline some of the key elements of the global challenge related to access to safe drinking water and sanitation. The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program’s 2010 Update reports that 884 million people lack access to an improved drinking water source. Beyond that, at least 2.6 billion do not have access to improved sanitation facilities, such as a toilet or even a pit latrine.

In 2000 world leaders came together at the Millennium Summit to ratify the Millennium Declaration and articulate a series of global commitments focused on raising living standards for the world’s poorest and most vulnerable populations over the next decade and a half. Shortly thereafter the UN released the Millennium Development Goals. Goal 7 of the Millennium Development Goals is to ensure environmental sustainability. Recognizing the close links among water, sanitation and well-being, Goal 7 has, among its targets, the commitment to cut in half the proportion of people without access to an improved water source and the proportion of people without access to improved sanitation facilities by the year 2015.

According to data released at the 2010 high-level plenary on the Millennium Development Goals held in New York last September, most countries are doing relatively well in reaching the water target; however, the world is not on track to meet the sanitation target. Water and sanitation challenges are particularly acute in sub-Saharan Africa, where the percentage of people without access to drinking water or sanitation continues to be high, and in Asia, where the sheer number of people without access to water and sanitation is staggering. Reasons for the failure of countries to reach the water and sanitation targets include the costs of implementing water and sanitation services, the cost of maintaining existing systems, and a lack of political will in some areas to prioritize water and sanitation interventions. Over the last eleven years national governments and donor governments, including the United States, have made significant progress in addressing water and sanitation deficiencies in developing countries, but the challenge persists.

Why should global leaders be concerned about population access to water and sanitation? First, the world's **health** is intimately linked to water and sanitation access. At least 1.5 million people die from water related disease every year, and the vast majority of those who die are children under the age of 5. Indeed, the WHO estimates that more than 80% of the global burden of disease – that is, all diseases -- is water related. Thus, promoting access to safe drinking water is integral to efforts to ensure child survival, to reducing rates of diarrheal disease, and reducing the rates of other, hygiene associated diseases, such as respiratory infections, which are among the leading causes of death among children, and trachoma, which causes blindness. Moreover, water is clearly integral to the global fight against HIV/AIDS, as it has been shown that patients with compromised immune systems will have a better response to

their anti-retroviral therapies if they have safe drinking water to use in taking their medications and in carrying out their daily activities.

Second there is an **economic** component to improved drinking water and sanitation access. At any given moment around half of the world's hospital beds are occupied by people suffering from waterborne diseases. Beyond the obvious costs that work absenteeism implies for employees and employers, there is also a significant economic burden carried by the family member who must also miss work, stay home or travel to distant health care facilities to care for loved ones. Women and girls in many societies must spend long hours walking to collect and then haul water, meaning they must sometimes forego educational and work opportunities to provide water for the households in which they live. The WHO estimates that up to 40 billion working hours are lost each year in Africa to water gathering efforts. When parents are reluctant to send daughters to school because local educational institutions do not count on private, sex-segregated bathroom facilities, girls lose out, as well. The Water and Sanitation Program administered by the World Bank recently reported that inadequate investments in sanitation facilities cost India \$53.8 billion dollars per year, with losses due to health care expenditures, opportunity costs, and stunted growth in the tourism sector.

A third -- and closely related -- issue is that of **security**: Having to travel great distances or to remote areas for water collection renders women and girls vulnerable to sexual violence or attack. In communities where there is not enough water for all, conflict and even violence can erupt. This has happened in Somalia, where armed gangs control and limit local populations' access to pumps or other water supplies. In Yemen, in 2006, local media reported protracted armed clashes between two tribal groups over access to a water well, leading to migration and arrests on both sides.

In the summer of 2010 the UN General Assembly recognized “safe and clean water and sanitation as a human right essential to the full enjoyment of life and all other human rights.” In the fall of 2010 the UN Human Rights Council affirmed this position with resolution 7/22, which emphasized that “international human rights law instruments, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child entail obligations in relation to access to safe drinking water and sanitation.”

The global community has now determined that access to safe, clean water and sanitation is a human right. As it considers how to put this recognition into practice, there are a number of issues to keep in mind, particularly if the issues of health, economic development, and security are kept in focus. But before I go on, let me put the question of domestic water use into broader context. Simply put, the amount of water dedicated to household water use, domestic water use, or personal water use, which is what we are referring to when we talk about access to safe drinking water and sanitation, makes up only a small proportion of the uses to which global freshwater supplies are put. Proportions vary across region and by country, but on average, according to data from 2001, about 70% of freshwater supplies are used in agriculture and 20% are used for energy and industry, leaving 10% for domestic use.

As I’ve already mentioned, the majority of freshwater supplies are used for agricultural production, whether it is cultivating crops, growing livestock, or transporting goods to market. In much of the developing world, where drinking water and sanitation challenges are most acute, agriculture is an important source of income for families and communities. The availability of fresh food in local markets is also an important determinant of nutrition. With under-nutrition a leading cause of childhood illness in the developing world, agriculture plays an important role in

promoting child health. Given the importance of agriculture to economic development, food security, and nutrition, it is important that policymakers working to improve drinking water and sanitation access be mindful of the important role water in agriculture plays with respect to health, economic development, and food security.

A second point to keep in mind is that water is an integral component of energy production and industrial output. Water can be a source of energy, as in hydropower, or it can be used for cooling energy production facilities, such as power plants. Water is also used in producing and refining energy sources, such as oil. Industries as diverse as mining, textile manufacturing, and electronic components all depend on water for production. While industrial production may not generate significant demand for water supplies in some developing countries, in emerging economies such as India and China expanding industries consume an ever greater amount of water, fueling economic growth and improving well-being for residents but also leading to tensions with farmers and domestic users in some cases. Certainly promoting access to improved energy sources is also a key element of economic development, freeing household members from firewood gathering chores and allowing more time for educational activities or entrepreneurial pursuits. The link between improved energy access and health is clear at the household level, where reliance on traditional methods of heating and cooking, such as burning wood or other biomass, put families – especially women and children – at risk for burns as well as acute respiratory infections and pulmonary disorders associated with exposure to indoor smoke. Thus, as with agriculture, it is also important to consider the relevance of water for energy when we talk about water in the context of health, economic development and security.

Given the many competing demands for and uses of water, it is striking to realize that the amount of freshwater available for the world to use is diminishing. This does not mean that the world's total volume of fresh water is disappearing. The volume of freshwater on the planet is relatively fixed, yet because of population growth and changing lifestyles, there are ever greater and more complex demands for the fresh water that is available. Also, as ground water sources are depleted or polluted and as dam and irrigation schemes in some regions have disrupted ecosystem processes, there is less water available in areas where it has traditionally been a reliable source for needy communities. It will be imperative that policymakers not only consider competing uses of water in protecting the right to safe drinking water and sanitation, but that they be mindful of water scarcity scenarios, as well. The issues, then, will be to protect water quality and quantity, to ensure that those who need access to safe drinking water have it, as is their right, and to protect access to water for other productive sectors, such as energy and agriculture, which are linked to similarly important health-related, economically-important, and security relevant activities.

In considering the way forward, several potential solutions come to mind:

- First, to ensure water quality, governments, communities, the agricultural, energy, and industrial sectors, must agree to legally-binding watershed protections to both protect water sources and reduce the potential for pollution of water supplies downstream. Regulatory measures to ensure water is priced appropriately, while ensuring that the poorest and most vulnerable populations have affordable and sustainable access for their drinking water needs, may also be considered to create incentives for water conservation and to reduce waste.

- Second, governance processes at the local and national levels should be developed to incorporate the voices and perspectives of all who have an interest in using water – whether for agriculture, energy, and health, education or women’s empowerment. This could involve strengthening local water councils, ensuring that women are incorporated into institutions that oversee water management, or creating national level structures to promote inter-sectoral cooperation and communication and ensure that those communities that require improved access to safe drinking water are able to make their views and needs known.
- Third, national governments, donor governments, and international organizations should encourage research and technical innovation to reduce pollution from agricultural and industrial processes, promote water conservation in business and production activities, and promote the development and dissemination of low-cost and sustainable water and sanitation delivery mechanisms to fulfill the needs of the most vulnerable sectors.
- Fourth, it will be essential to strengthen the political will of national governments around the world to invest in facilities to deliver the safe, clean water and sanitation to which their citizens have a recognized right. The Millennium Development Goals and the recent recognition of water and sanitation access as human rights are an important step. Efforts such as UN Water’s Global Annual Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water and the work of the Water and Sanitation Program’s Economics of Sanitation Initiative also help make the case regarding the positive financial impacts of water and sanitation investments.

- Fifth, it is important to develop mechanisms to ensure coordination of efforts in developing countries, both within national governments and among donor governments. Not only is it important that the water, health, agriculture, energy, industrial, and education sectors communicate and coordinate around water usage and access, but the international groups that seek to address the developing world's water challenges must also do a better job of coordinating among themselves to avoid duplication of effort and to reduce the burden of coordination placed on host countries and communities.
- Finally, it is important to incorporate a diverse array of sectors into the effort to address global water challenges. In the United States, government agencies such as the Department of State, the Agency for International Development, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have contributed significantly to improving global access to safe drinking water and sanitation. The 2005 Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act has made advancing work on drinking water and sanitation an important element of U.S. foreign policy. However, U.S. citizens, through private voluntary organizations, through NGOs, and through private sector entities, have made significant contributions to resolving global water challenges, as well. One group that contributes enormously to overseas work on water, sanitation, and hygiene is the U.S. higher education sector, which carries out independent research regarding what works, builds capacity through training programs, and partners with universities in developing countries to identify and implement solutions to drinking water and sanitation access problems. Policymakers

should strengthen opportunities for U.S.-based volunteers, businesses, researchers, and educators to contribute to global work on water, sanitation and hygiene.

In conclusion, the fact that nearly 900 million people lack access to safe drinking water and more than 2.6 billion lack access to improved sanitation facilities is serious global challenge with health, economic, and security implications. Global leaders, through the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council have now recognized that access to safe drinking water and sanitation is a human right. Other sectors, such as agriculture, industry, and energy, also rely on freshwater sources for production and contribute to health, economic growth, and security, as well. It is important for policymakers to recognize the many competing demands for freshwater and to identify sustainable ways to protect and share precious resources for the greater good. Legal, political, technical, educational, and research solutions can help chart a path forward to address this important issue.