

OCTOBER 12, 2016 2:43PM EDT

Water 'Haves' and 'Have Nots': Why Water Scarcity is a Human Rights Issue

Published in [Brisbane Times](#)



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This week, Brisbane hosts the world's [first conference](#) on water scarcity and drought. Of course, access to drinking water varies considerably around the world due to natural differences in geography and climate. But there is another distinction between the water "haves" and "have nots": the role of their governments.

Much of how water is regulated is technical – whether aquifer recharge zones are protected; how to avoid leaking water pipes; whether megacities and farming communities alike can secure and manage water resources for their populations.

While the technical challenges to address water scarcity can be daunting, they are often easier to tackle than underlying issues of poor governance and inequality in access. In many parts of the world, negligence, corruption, or a lack of accountability undermine the right to water. Governments are often slow to act, unaccountable, and deny or minimise manifest harm.

Time and again, our research has shown how the poor and the marginalised are most severely affected when governments fail to do their job. A lack of legal protection disproportionately affects people who are unable to get adequate information on environmental threats and who have limited opportunity to participate meaningfully in decision-making, let alone to demand accountability and redress.

We have seen that in remote Turkana county in Kenya, where climate change and regional development projects [threaten the health and livelihood](#) of indigenous pastoralists. People living in Turkana told Human Rights Watch that they faced increased difficulty in getting water, and that many water sources had dried out, making every day a struggle for survival.

We have seen that in western Thailand, where the water in Klity Creek was contaminated by lead from a badly regulated and now defunct lead processing factory upstream. Thailand's public health and environment authorities [did nothing for 17 years](#) to prevent further lead exposure for village residents. Despite a Supreme Court order to clean up the site in 2013, Thailand's authorities have yet to begin.

We have seen that in Bangladesh, where the government is [failing to adequately respond](#) to naturally occurring arsenic in drinking water across large areas of rural Bangladesh, directly threatening the health of at least 20 million people. Government-funded deep wells can usually provide arsenic-free water even where the shallow aquifer is heavy in arsenic, but current government policy allows members of parliament to decide who gets 50 per cent of all new potentially life-saving wells. They are not going to those who need them most, but often to supporters and allies of politicians.

We have seen that in Canada, where indigenous people living on reserves [do not have the same access](#) to safe water as most other Canadians, and where dozens of communities have received government warnings of a high risk that their drinking water is contaminated in a country that has one of the largest shares of fresh water in the world.

Often, women and girls bear the brunt of scarcity. The unpaid work of providing water to households with scarce water resources [disproportionately falls](#) to women and girls. In many countries, women and girls spend 30 minutes per trip to fetch water, globally this accounts for [40 billion hours](#) yearly of unpaid work. This is time women and girls cannot invest in school, work, or other activities.



Girls from the Kalokol Girls Primary School fetch water from a dry riverbed to carry back to their school, which does not have access to running water. Nearby Lake Turkana is too saline for human consumption.

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The struggle to get clean water is often a human rights struggle. Water scarcity can often be directly traced back to government action or inaction – the absence of laws or policies addressing environmental harm, a lack of enforcement of existing laws or policies, or reinforcement of inequality through discriminatory budget allocations.

There is increasing recognition that the human right to water cannot be separated from global discussions about water scarcity and governance. The United Nations and the World Bank have convened a High-Level Panel on Water, which just released an Action Plan to help ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. In line with international law, it declares that "access to clean water and sanitation should not be a privilege for a few, but a basic human right".

Australia's recent commitments of \$A100 million for water-related projects under its aid program is a key step forward in moving the action plan from words to reality. One key goal is for the funding to promote policy and regulatory reforms to deliver sustainable services. The reforms need to be made in consultation with the communities most affected by water scarcity, and governments should be prepared to enforce laws and regulations – not for the benefit of a few but to protect the rights of the many who lack safe water.

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Topic

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