

What rights do future generations have to a stable climate and clean water?

In the American Journal of International Law piece “Our Rights and Obligations to Future Generations for the Environment”, renowned environmental lawyer Edith Weiss discusses that one of the definitive foundations that highlight the rights of future generations to have a stable climate and clean water is that the Earth and the shared resources belong to no man. Hence, its essential resources should not be depleted and over-utilised and should be consumed respectfully so future generations can enjoy the Earth and its natural resources (Weiss, 1990). In light of this, future generations have the right to benefit from climate conditions and access to clean water, essential assets crucial to human survival and continuance. The interlinked disasters that arise from climate and clean water instability threaten the continued sustenance of conducive living conditions for future generations. Without access to clean water and a stable climate, the existence of the future generation is at risk. The current stewardesses of the Earth have enjoyed but exploited the benefits of a healthy climate and access to clean water and have an obligation to future generations to provide an opportunity for these generations to appreciate the goodness of the shared resources that support the ecosystem.

How are public resources shared –or threatened– in your community?

In Lagos, Nigeria, where I was born, public resources, particularly water, are currently threatened by political and social factors. The current political state where the government operates as a “for-profit” institution has produced a vicious cycle of inequitable distribution of water resources which is a considerable threat to public health and good life quality. In Lagos, the daily water demand exceeds the production capacity of the primary water provider Lagos Water Corporation. The city has a water shortage of about 320 million gallons, and the water distribution infrastructure operates below capacity. Lagos has roughly 100km of water transmission mains dated, some as old as 108 years (Oluwafemi, 2018).

The city’s government solution to address the threat to water has proven to be an even more significant threat. Lagos State governance has privatised some water distribution networks to improve the water shortage in the city. From this context, it can be concluded that the government fails to respect water as a source of life and a necessity for living for all residents. The lack of understanding of the value of water beyond a monetary figure continues to persuade the government to pursue private partnerships, which often overcharge for supply and underserve Lagosians. Private entities misconstrue their justification for water supply costs by only surveying the willingness to pay from higher-earning households and selling water at an unaffordable price for most of the population. A “2016 Poverty Profile by the Lagos State Bureau of Statistics, a government agency, found that over 80 per cent of households in Lagos – about 20 million people, based on the population estimate in the 2016 Poverty Profile – earned less than \$1.90 a day, the international poverty line used by the World Bank” (Ewang, 2021).

With limited oversight on the quality of work, the government continues to depend on private contractors to maintain and develop new water distribution pipelines. It needs to recognise that these entities are often riddled by intense corruption and profit-driven; therefore, there are few incentives to provide high-standard delivery infrastructure. Lagos state must pivot from the commodification of water and appropriately use public funding to support a vital public resource.

What new set of water ethics could a government demonstrate to gain your trust for improved water treatment, testing, and delivery?

Firstly, the government must recognise that poor water quality and inaccessibility as a direct consequence of human actions is misbehaviour and criminal and should be regarded as such. Government agencies should consider values and goals that promote a systematic and holistic approach to water management that benefits all users.

The government ensuring a transition from a market-based economy that turns public resources and free services into consumer products may allow increased trust and improve water treatment, testing and delivery. The market-based economy reinforces a discriminatory system where public resources and otherwise free services are sold at a premium that is often not affordable and accessible to all parties. Furthermore, the market-based economy often operates as a monopoly with vital resources controlled by one corporate entity. Frequently, these entities take advantage of the monopoly and provide subpar and poor-quality public services. The government can establish standards and policies that ban private corporations and entities from monopolising the distribution and sale of water, a shared resource.

By developing water ethics that recognise water as a shared and vital common resource, government entities can develop land use ordinances to prevent corporate parties from dumping toxic chemicals and materials in specific land spaces that could directly run off into the water and degrade its quality.

Works Cited

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