

Maude Barlow: Speaking notes for Nobel Dialogue

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The United Nations calls water scarcity the scourge of the Earth. Every day, 2 billion people are forced to drink contaminated water and every two minutes a child under five dies of waterborne disease.

If we do not change our ways, by 2030, five billion people could suffer serious water shortages.

In 2010, the people of the world took an evolutionary step forward when the United Nations recognized water and sanitation as fundamental human rights. That day, we collectively declared that it is not acceptable for someone to die or watch their child die because they cannot afford to buy clean water.

Most importantly, we recognized that access to water and sanitation is an issue of justice, not charity.

Now, nearly four dozen countries have amended their Constitution or written new laws to recognize the right to water.

And a number of the most marginalized communities on Earth have used the courts and the UN resolution to force their governments to recognize this fundamental, life-giving right.

As we move forward to address the twin water crises – one ecological and one human – we must do so based on a set of shared values.

While the ecological crisis impacts all of us, it impacts the poor differently. And not just in the Global South – water cut-offs to the poor are now common in some wealthy countries.

To truly guarantee the right to water, we must protect it as a public trust and a commons, not a commodity to be put on the open market for sale like oil and gas.

And we must challenge the current power structures and institutions that support unequal access to the planet's dwindling water supplies.

Our goal must be clean, affordable, accessible, public water for all everywhere.

But it will be impossible to realize the right to water if we continue to pollute, plunder, divert, over-extract and mismanage the planet's limited water sources.

Make no mistake; while climate change negatively impacts water, our abuse of water and the destruction of local hydrologic cycles is a major contributor to climate chaos.

The good news is the protection and restoration of watersheds is a major part of the climate solution.

Therefore, we must stop seeing water as a resource for our pleasure and profit and understand it is the key element in living ecosystems that give us all life.

Water has rights outside of its usefulness to humans. Water belongs to the Earth and other living beings and requires new Earth-centred laws of governance.

Finally, we will never realize the human right to water as long as water is a source of conflict, violence and even war. Rather – and here is the miracle – water has been and can be again a source of peace if we can understand its lesson.

Just as groundwater and springs and rivers and lakes are all interconnected and interdependent, so too, are humans. If we truly listen, water could become nature's gift to teach us to live more lightly on mother Earth and in peace and harmony with one another.