

## Book review

### ***The Right to Water: politics, governance and social struggles* Edited by Farhana Sultana and Alex Loftus Earthscan: London and New York: ISBN: 978-1-84971-359-7**

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It is hard to believe it has taken so long to officially recognize the importance of water to human existence on the planet. As recently as 2010, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution that made water and sanitation a human right, equal to all other human rights which implies it is justiciable and enforceable. So, a victory for humanity and a swift end to all water and sanitation related suffering? Think again. Despite the resolution and overwhelming positive rhetoric, the legal framework in which this sits is not clear and implementation remains highly contested. Who exactly is claiming water rights? What sort of rights, to what sort of services? How and where can these be enforced? Will it be possible to protect the human right to water and sanitation, without recognizing the inherent rights of nature and other species? And so on. The easy bit has been done; now the imperative to discuss, debate, action and find consensus for the political and legal basis of this resolution is required.

With this in mind, Farhana Sultana and Alex Loftus bring together a variety of respected researchers to explore what water as a human right 'really' means in relation to different philosophical perspectives and geographical settings. The result is a first class examination of the persisting tensions and uncertainties that exist in articulating water as a human right. By examining the real problems of this notion in such an insightful way, the book is a key text in advancing our understandings of the UN Resolution and an important point of reference in current and future debates.

In terms of the structure of 'The Right to Water', there are two broad sections. Following a Foreword by renowned researcher, Maude Barlow, and introductory chapter by the editors (Sultana and Loftus), the book covers (i) theoretical approaches to water rights across five chapters; and (ii) nine empirical case studies. The theoretical chapters cover a range of fundamental questions linked to water rights philosophy, legal issues, property rights and ethics of global water governance. The empirical case studies analyse some of the current water management challenges and conflicts of water rights in Israel, India, Europe, South Africa, New Zealand and the Americas (Bolivia, Columbia, Mexico-USA).

Karen Bakker's reprinted article from 2007 provides necessary context to one of the central tensions in past and current debates; namely, water as a commodity versus water as a public good. Her postscript brings her arguments up-to-date by emphasizing the need to focus on 'property rights' – she suggests this offers more potential for politically progressive strategies than a pure focus on 'water rights'. The following four chapters articulate different theoretical and legal aspects covering such themes as relational perspectives of water rights, social equity, citizen participation, water governance and property rights.

One of the key strengths of the book is the direct engagement with some of the most contested regions in terms of water management. The chapter on water politics in the West Bank by Ilaria Giglioli is a case in point. Here the term 'human right to water' brings into play difficult questions regarding justice and the strong relationship between

water, rights and citizenship in Palestine. Likewise, Patrick Bond and Cristy Clark write separate chapters on different but related aspects of the South African water rights context. Held up as one of the most progressive water rights framework to date, both authors make reference to a high profile water rights case (*Mazibuko vs. Johannesburg Water*) as a means to reflect on citizen rights, market failures, social movements and community participation in water management.

An argument made by a number of the authors, including Bakker (page 27), is that water as a human right is in fact 'compatible with capitalist political economic systems'. There is a concern that gains made on legal and moral grounds may continue to be undone by questionable capitalist practices of water corporations. Unscrupulous disconnection for non-payment, pre-paid water meters and tariff hikes are examples of such capitalist practices. Despite this, the reader is left asking, what role, if any, does the corporate sector have in a new vision for water and sanitation provision? Based on past records, is it to be correctly assumed that the interests of corporations will always be at odds with the new conceptualization of water as a 'human right'? Or is there evidence that corporates are reworking their approach to service provision via corporate and social responsibility and sustainability reporting? A quick glance at the Global Water Intelligence website reveals private sector interests in the water sector are still very much alive; thus, it appears pertinent to give some space to reflect on their future role and participation in light of water rights developments.

While the reader may have benefited from a concluding chapter that synthesized the book's key learning points as a means to consider the next step in this debate, this is more than adequately covered off in the Introductory chapter. Fahana and Loftus emphasize that current and future water rights discussion must move beyond apolitical and technical talk; while the recognition of water as a human

right at the highest international level is an important milestone, ultimately 'the right to water says little about how people will be provided with water and who might provide it' (Dubreuil 2006). Rather, Fahana and Loftus argue we should be posing (and answering) the often overlooked difficult questions related to power relations in decision making, inequality, accessibility and how authority is enacted across sites and scales. They argue there is optimism that through this line of questioning new social movements may emerge and a more radical transformative politics could be achieved. Ultimately, moving the discussion forward in such a way could offer far greater opportunity for ordinary people to participate more democratically in the 'hydrosocial cycle' (Swyngedouw 2004; Linton 2010).

'The Right to Water: politics, governance and social struggles' is so much more than a book about water; it contributes to intellectual advances on human rights, citizenship, socio-political movements and community participation. Accordingly, this will be of wide interest to researchers in development studies, geography, political science and related disciplines, whether or not water is their primary focus. In addition to an obvious appeal to government and non-government agencies working in human rights/water provision fields, it also offers more than a passing interest to those with engineering and science backgrounds, especially those examining water, sanitation and hygiene related topics in developing countries.

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## REFERENCES

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