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Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
вопросам образования,  
науки и культуры

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للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,  
on the occasion of the Summit of Nobel Peace laureates  
“Right to Water as a Human Right”**

**Paris, 11 December 2008**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today's summit takes place as we celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which proclaims that “the recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”

Over the past 60 years, many legal instruments have been developed to further promote and protect the fundamental rights enshrined in this Declaration. UNESCO, itself, has adopted more than 30 conventions, recommendations and declarations relating to human rights, in particular the rights to education, to cultural life and to freedom of expression. UNESCO has also been very much involved in areas of emerging rights, including the environment, and particularly water.

Today, I would like to talk to you about the right to water and how it relates to human rights and life itself.

To begin with, many of the human rights affirmed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights cannot be fulfilled without access to water:

For example, the right to housing is inextricably linked to sustainable access to safe drinking water, sanitation and washing facilities.

Without access to proper water supplies, children are forced to walk long distances, often several times a day, to provide water for their families, thus missing school and undermining the fundamental right to education.

Of course, water is a prerequisite to the right to an adequate standard of living and to the right to food, which cannot be cultivated without water.

The list is long, but it can be summarized with one right: the right to life, because without water, no life can be sustained.

The right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water. And it must be enjoyed without discrimination, and equally by women and men.

This is why, in 2000, when the international community adopted the eight Millennium Development Goals aimed at eradicating extreme poverty, they included, under MDG 7, the goal of halving the proportion of persons without access to safe drinking water and sanitation by 2015.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The right to water is indispensable for leading a healthy and dignified life. Yet, in this twenty-first century, access to water is denied to millions in developing as well as developed countries.

At the turn of the new millennium, when the MDGs were set, 1.4 billion persons were deprived of access to adequate drinking water. Around 2.4 billion lacked access to basic sanitation.

Where are we now, eight years later?

While progress has been made towards expanding access to safe drinking water, some 884 million people – around 13 percent of the world's population – are denied this basic right.

The figures in the area of sanitation are appalling, and worse than eight years ago if population growth is taken into account. Today, around 2.5 billion people – nearly 40 percent of the world's population, a shocking figure – still lack access to safe sanitation. Of these, 1.2 billion have no access to sanitation facilities at all.

With 80 per cent of diseases either water born or water related, it is imperative that action be taken urgently to address this drastic situation.

Between 2 and 5 million people die every year for want of a glass of clean water or basic sanitation. The vast majority are children. Millions of women and young girls are forced to walk further and further every day, spending hours to collect and carry water to their families, restricting their opportunities and their choices. Farmers are forced to try to catch the rain from the skies to plant the food they need for survival.

Africa, in particular, is suffering. Recent studies report major deterioration in all of Africa's 677 major lakes. Many are in danger of becoming swamps in the next two decades due to unsustainable over-use and/or climatic variability and change. In Africa, twenty-two countries are currently experiencing severe water crisis. Waterborne killers such as malaria, typhoid, cholera and even the plague have returned to the continent.

Globally, if current trends continue, by the year 2015 around 2.4 billion people will still lack access to basic sanitation. Such a scenario would severely impede, and even reverse, poverty reduction and economic growth in some of the world's poorest countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The twin realities of growing freshwater shortages, combined with deeply inequitable access to the resource, pose the greatest ecological and human rights threats of our time.

Water affects all aspects of life be it the environment, health and sanitation, the food we eat or the industry and energy production that powers our development.

It is no coincidence that water cuts across all the MDGs. Water is a precondition for every aspect of human development.

If we are to succeed, we must provide more than a quarter of a million people with improved water supply and hygiene each and every day. We must act now. We cannot carry on as we do. Many aspects of water resources management must change.

The international community has to stop the unsustainable exploitation of water resources by developing integrated water management strategies at the regional, national and local levels which promote both equitable access and adequate supplies.

We need to recognize that water belongs to the earth and all its species and that we are only the trustees of this precious resource.

We need to understand that if it is to be distributed equitably, water can never be appropriated for profit.

We need to learn to conserve water and reuse it rather than waste it, contaminate it and deplete it.

We also need to understand that water management decisions must involve local communities because local stewardship is the best safeguard for a water-secure future.

Governments have a lead role to play in all these respects. Every government has the obligation to progressively increase the number of people with safe, affordable and convenient access to drinkable water, through legal, financial and political commitments.

Governments need to develop laws that transpose the rules of international humanitarian law into national and local settings. Such laws should guarantee access to water, and set the mandatory framework within which water providers, whether public or private, operate and provide a basic minimum of water free of charge for human consumption.

Governments also need to engage public funding to secure such basic minimum water for everyone.

Depending on the particular circumstances, strategies to ensure non-discriminatory and affordable access to water can employ private companies. These should operate, under public accountability, in a liberalized, but regulated, market. Governments therefore need to ensure that tiered tariffs target different users.

The cost of achieving MDG 7 on water and sanitation is estimated at 11.3 billion dollars a year. Yet, the potential returns of such investment are immense.

Each dollar invested would yield an economic return of 3 to 34 dollars, depending on the region. By 2015, health-related savings would reach around 7.3 billion dollars per year worldwide.

But we must work together. Let me therefore appeal to all those present here today, who have done so much to build peace around the world, to help raise global awareness of the need to use this valuable resource more efficiently. Let me also call on your support in mobilizing governments and engaging them in their duty to ensure equitable access to water, especially among the most marginalized and vulnerable sections of society.

Securing the right to water is our shared responsibility. We will need the goodwill and energy of all to succeed.

Thank you.