



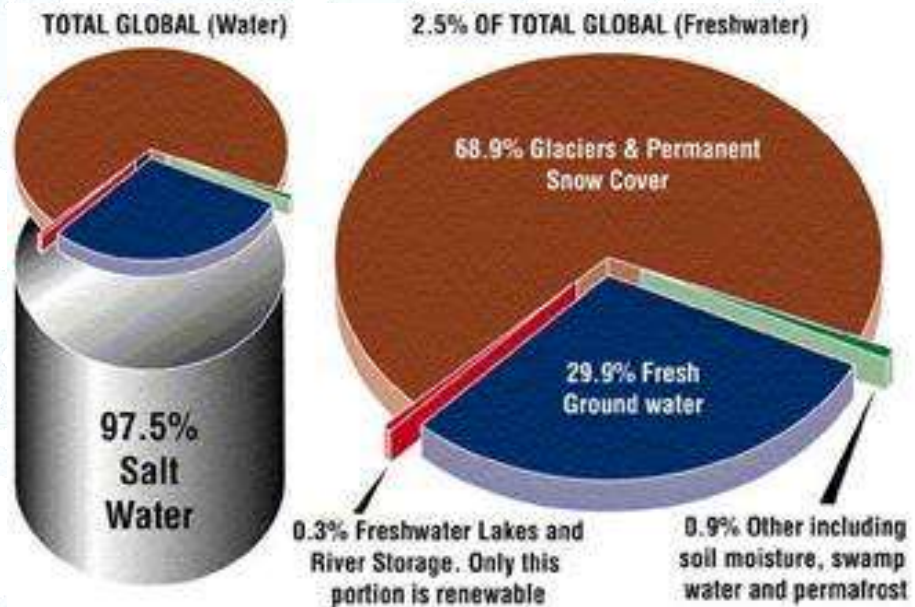
## *Recognizing the Humanitarian Need for Clean Water*

**By: Tim Williams**

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**Introduction:** Water is an essential resource for human survival that is increasingly in short supply, causing immense hardship for people in many regions and raising the danger of armed conflict over this scarce resource. Access to safe water is not guaranteed in much of the world. Disputes over fresh waters have raised tension and contributed to violence in East Africa and the Middle East. Access to fresh water is serious source of violence in Kenya, Sudan and Uganda. It was widely seen as a contributory factor in the genocidal fighting in Sudan's eastern region of Darfur in 2002-2004. Water disputes between Turkey and Syria presaged conflict between the two countries. Bangladesh and India have wrestled with serious confrontations over diversion of Ganges River water, and India and Pakistan have resolved disputes on tributaries to the Indus River. The prospect of diverting the massive Brahmaputra River raises the possibility of new conflicts between China and India. Such conflicts are certain to get worse. Efforts by states to resolve these issues by themselves have reduced problems or tensions. Solutions are more likely to be found only through systematic international action.

Water debates focus on two major issues: sanitary supplies and issues of national control. Nearly 97 percent of Earth's water is contained in the world's oceans. The remaining 2 to 3 percent consists of the Earth's freshwater sources. Ice packs and glaciers account for more than two-thirds of the freshwater; ground water accounts for another 30 percent; high latitude permafrost accounts for nearly one percent; and freshwater lakes, soil moisture, the atmosphere, wetlands, rivers, and vegetation accounts for the rest of Earth's freshwater sources. According to the US Geological Survey, there is approximately only 11 trillion cubic meters of freshwater available for use. All the world's population of over 7 billion people require



Source: Bret Schulte, "A World of Thirst," US News and World Report, March 2007.



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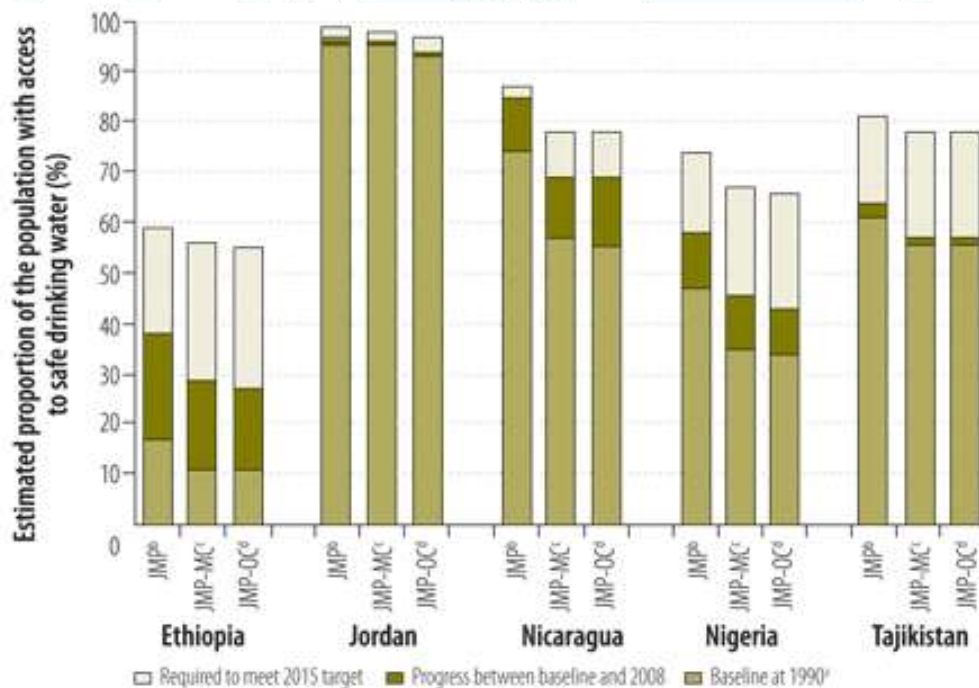
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access to this freshwater for survival, which means each person has less than 2,000 cubic meters of freshwater at their disposal, if the resource were evenly distributed. With global population is likely to reach 8 trillion by the year 2025, which begs the question: *What happens when demand for fresh water starts exceeding supply?*

**Today's Global Water Crisis:** Access to water is being affected by population growth, industrialization, and urbanization. As a result of these factors, demand for water oftentimes exceeds supply. The World Bank reports that nearly 80 countries now have water shortages, and according to the World Health Organization (WHO) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) Joint Monitoring Program for Water Supply and Sanitation (JMP), more than 780 million people lack access to improved sources of drinking water and 2.5 billion lack improved sanitation.

**Figure 1. Percentage of population with access to safe drinking-water in five countries, by assessment method**



**Acronyms:** JMP, Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation; RADWQ, Rapid Assessment of Drinking-Water Quality; WHO, World Health Organization.



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Not only is water access for human consumption and health becoming limited, but water access for agriculture and other industrial processes are diminishing. For nearly three decades, world demand for agriculture products has increased 2.2 percent a year. Agricultural productivity will likely continue to increase as human population continues to grow; however, water resources for agriculture, or other industrial processes, will consequently decline.

The declining access to water for human consumption, industrial processes, and all other uses is likely to influence levels of tension in many parts of the world. This threat of violent conflict is a cause for concern in certain volatile regions of poor governance, such as North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and Central Asia. These regions consist of states that are most likely unable

to deal with the increased competition for water resources. The combination of water competition with poverty, social tensions, environmental degradation, ineffectual leadership, and weak political institutions makes these states most susceptible to violent conflict, instability, and state failure. Furthermore, regional tensions are being exacerbated by states using diplomacy and other means to preserve their water interests and by states using water as a diplomatic weapon against others. There are currently more than 260 river basins shared by two or more countries in the world. Management of these basins has traditionally involved agreements between those state governments surrounding the basin; however, most of today's water basin agreements are inadequate or do not exist. Therefore, access to these basins has been a potential source or aggravator for stress, conflict, and regional instability.

According to the UN Environmental Program (UNEP), those regions / countries most affected by the global water crisis include Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, and the Middle East. Effects of water scarcity can also be seen in the US, where state legislative measures are often taken to conserve the use of water within the country. In response to the global water crisis, many international and non-governmental organizations have come together to combat this crisis, particularly in those communities in the countries / regions most affected. These organizations not only offer education on water conservation and the importance of water management but also work to encourage states and international institutions to take more proactive actions to prevent the crisis from worsening. Some of the larger organizations involved include the UN, WHO, UNICEF, Cooperative Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE), and the World Trade Organization (WTO); numerous other humanitarian-based organizations have also been very active in raising public awareness on the global water crisis.



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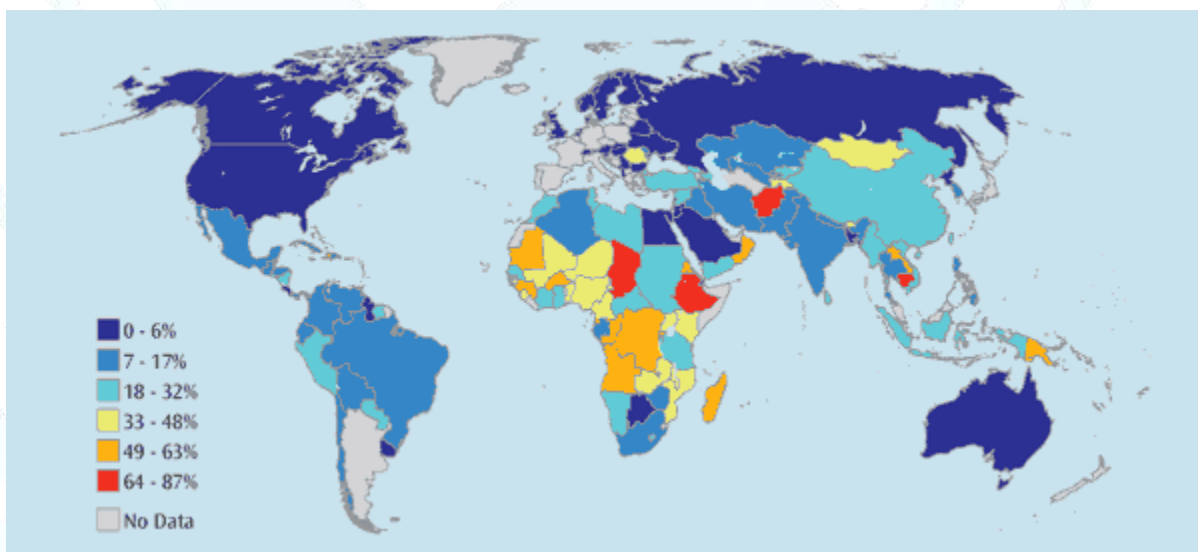
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**Figure 2. Percentage of population using improved sanitation facilities (2010)**



Source: WHO/UNICEF (2012)

**Figure 3. Percentage of population obtaining drinking-water from an unimproved source (2010)**



Source: WHO/UNICEF (2012)



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**The United Nations and the Global Water Crisis:** The insufficient supply of water to satisfy human, commercial, and agricultural needs and the potential conflicts associated with water management in certain volatile countries / regions have been issues addressed by the UN since at least the mid-1970s. Actions undertaken within the UN have remained largely humanitarian efforts. The UN has worked with many international and non-governmental organizations to decrease the number of people without access to freshwater or acceptable sanitation facilities. Recent reports on the progress of the UN's resolve in this regard suggest the actions of the UN have been relatively successful.

In 1975, the GA decided to convene the UN Water Conference in Argentina from March 7-18, 1977 (A/RES/3513). At the UN Water Conference, the attending delegates, who represented 116 nation-states, intergovernmental organizations, and non-governmental organizations, formed the Mar del Plata Action Plan. This was the first instance that water was recognized as a right. The Action Plan declared that "All peoples, whatever their stage of development and social and economic conditions, have the right to have access to drinking water in quantities and of a quality equal to their basic needs." The UN adopted the resolution in 1977 (A/RES/32/158).

In addition to recognizing water as a right, the Action Plan called for the designation of the decade 1981-1990 as the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade. In 1980, the GA convened to make the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade a reality (A/RES/35/18). All member states of this resolution pledged their commitment to improve the standards and levels of services in drinking water supply and sanitation by the year 1990.

Following the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade, WHO and UNICEF established a Joint Monitoring Program for Water Supply and Sanitation (JMP). The aim of this program has been to report on the global status of water supply and sanitation and to support countries in improving their monitoring performance. According to one JMP report, more than 2 billion people have gained access to improved drinking water sources and 1.8 billion people have gained access to improved sanitation since 1990. The JMP has produced progress reports every two years on the access to drinking water and sanitation worldwide. By the year 2000, the JMP became the official source within the UN System to produce reports for the UN Secretary General on the progress related to the Millennium Development Goals targeting water supply and sanitation.



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In 2000, the GA unanimously adopted the UN Millennium Declaration (A/RES/55/2). 189 heads of state signed the Millennium Declaration and effectively committed themselves to the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG). Under MDG III, Development and Poverty Eradication, the member states pledged their commitment to “halve [by the year 2015] the proportion of people who are unable to reach or to afford safe drinking water”. In addition, under MDG IV, Protecting our Common Environment, the pledges committed themselves to “stop[ping] the unsustainable exploitation of water resources by developing water management strategies at the regional, national, and local levels”. As noted above, the JMP for Water Supply and Sanitation has become the official report to assess the progress towards related targets under the MDGs.

The most recent action by the GA to meet the water-related MDG targets came in December 2003 when the GA proclaimed the decade 2005-2015 as the International Decade for Action: “Water for Life” (A/RES/58/217). The primary goal was to motivate efforts to fulfill commitments made on water and water-related issues by the year 2015. Reports released by JMP suggest significant progress has been made but continued vigilance is necessary to continue to address those that remain without water or adequate sanitation.

**Conclusion:** For decades, the UN has been working closely with numerous organizations to address global issues concerning water. The formation of the Mar del Plata Action Plan in 1977 became the first instance that the UN recognized water as a right. Since this action plan, member states from the UN have worked closely with many organizations to educate others on the global water crisis and to promote support for the ultimate goal of ensuring everyone access to freshwater and adequate sanitation facilities. Reports have suggested success in this aspect, but they also continue to push for and encourage further vigilance. Hundreds of millions still remain without access to water, and almost two billion still do not have access to appropriate sanitation facilities.





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