

27 July 2011, United Nations - "Water is life. Water is humanity. How could it be part of the private business?" asked Bolivian President Evo Morales Wednesday, stressing the social and economic consequences of the growing trend of private ownership over water supply and delivery systems in many parts of the world.

Morales, the first-ever indigenous president of Bolivia and an outspoken advocate of the rights of "Mother Earth", also criticised capitalist countries of the North for failing to adopt a rights-based approach towards the problems of global warming and the rapid loss of plant and animal species.

"If we don't respect the rights of Mother Earth, we cannot respect human rights," he told a news conference at U.N. headquarters before heading to the U.N. General Assembly where he addressed a meeting on water and sanitation.

More than two billion people across the world have no access to sanitation facilities and clean water. Numerous U.N. studies have shown a strong link between deadly diseases and the lack of access to clean water in many countries of the South.

Research shows that inadequate access to clean and safe drinking water remains a major obstacle for the success of international initiatives on sustainable economic and social development in financially impoverished regions of the world.

The international community has pledged to reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015, a target that is unlikely to be met on time.

"Progress is on track," said U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon about achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, but warned diplomats at the General Assembly gathering that the world "will miss the water and sanitation target".

"It is not acceptable that poor slum-dwellers pay five or even 10 times as much for their water as wealthy residents of the same areas of the same cities," he said. However, in the same breath, Ban added: "Let us be clear: a right to water and sanitation does not mean that water should be free."

Morales's stance on this issue reflected a completely different worldview.

"Without water, there can be no food, no life," he said, challenging the notion that water management by private corporations will accelerate the process of development. "Competition of any sort cannot resolve the issue of poverty."

The first-ever indigenous president of Bolivia, who is well-known for his outspokenness and socialist views, said his government had already expelled some multinational companies that were seeking privatisation of water in his country.

"Water is a basic public need that must not be managed by private interests, and that it should be available to all the people," he said, a view endorsed by a number of diplomats from the developing countries who spoke at the General Assembly meeting.

"Access to safe drinking water and sanitation is a pre-condition to eradicate poverty," said Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti, the Brazilian envoy to the U.N. "The right to safe water and sanitation [is] intrinsically connected to the right to life, to physical integrity, to health, to food, and adequate housing."

The U.S. delegate also supported the view that access to water is a universal human right, but shied away from discussing the role of the private sector in the supply and distribution of drinking water. "The U.S. is committed to solving the world's water problems," he said.

According to Food and water Watch, a non-governmental organisation- based in Washington, many women and children in rural areas in developing countries spend hours each day walking kilometres to collect water from unprotected sources such as open wells, muddy dugouts or streams.

In urban areas, they collect it from polluted waterways or pay high prices to buy it from vendors who obtain it from dubious sources. The water is often dirty and unsafe, but they have no alternative.

Carrying the heavy water containers back home is an exhausting task, which takes up valuable time and energy, according to the group. It often prevents women from doing vital domestic or income-generating work and stops children from going to school.

"Water is a human right. We believe that corporations cannot provide better service to consumers," said Kate Fried of the Water and Food Watch in support of Morales's views. "Water service can be provided more effectively by public-public partnership."

Water Aid, another non-profit organization, says the total global investments in water and sanitation would need to double for the Millennium Development Goals' target of halving the proportion of people living without water and sanitation by 2015 to be met.

Asked by IPS if his views on the right to water are getting support from the richest countries, Morales said that Spain was the only country from the European Union that was in alliance with Bolivia on this subject.

"There should be no one without access to water," he quoted Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, the Spanish prime minister, as saying.

Source: [IPS News](#)