

PRESS RELEASE

Brussels, European Parliament, 17 February 2014

AquaFed calls upon the EU to be more active in implementing the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation

Today, the European Parliament is organising a hearing on the first European Citizens' Initiative [ECI]. Private water operators, that supply safe drinking water or sanitation daily to more than 150 million EU citizens, i.e. close to one third of the EU population, have evidence to bring to the Members of the Parliament. Based on their expertise and experience, they also have proposals to present on how to implement the human right better in the EU (see overleaf). Despite their request, the Parliament decided not to invite them. This means that the ECI hearing will not be sufficient to inform the MEPs fully on matters that should concern them about these ECI proposals.

In application of the European Treaties, the 1.7 million citizens who signed the 3 requests of the ECI(2012)000003 obtained the right to present these requests to an official hearing in the European Parliament. It is very surprising to see that the organisers of this ECI Right2Water are invited by the Parliament today to present their own interpretation of these requests and to make their own proposals without the Parliament hearing other views, interpretations or propositions on the same matters.

Both Public and Private Water Operators turn the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation into reality. That is their job. They do it daily in Europe and the other parts of the world. Both public and private water operators are tools that governments use to deliver this Human Right.

After their unanimous reaffirmation of this human right in New York on 19 November 2013, all governments should take action to ensure that their whole population enjoys access to a minimum quantity of drinking water that is safe, accessible, available, acceptable, affordable and can be obtained without discrimination. All EU member states should make sure that their institutional frameworks enable their public authorities to satisfy all these dimensions of the Right and that they provide appropriate instructions to whatever organisations they use to deliver it.

Today, this is not the case everywhere in the European Union. As the EU Commissioner for Environment Janez Potočnik, EU Commissioner for Development Andris Piebalgs and EU Commissioner for Internal Market and Services Michel Barnier, all stated on World Water Day 2013 : "20 million Europeans don't have access to quality water and safe sanitation." Furthermore, today, mechanisms that ensure drinking water affordability for economically-disadvantaged citizens are still not present in all EU regions.

In this context, the first European Citizens' Initiative [ECI] is very welcome. Through it, 1.7 million European citizens are drawing the attention of EU institutions to these gaps and to the need for the EU to take strong action to implement the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation. Human rights are neutral on the ways public services are organised. Polemics about the respective merits of the different types of operators should not hide the urgent need for action to satisfy this human right for the millions of Europeans who require better access to water and sanitation.

As practitioners of water services operation, private water operators have said repeatedly that the EU should raise its sights on satisfying this human right. This is the aim of the attached proposals.

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AquaFed is the International Federation of Private Water Operators. Open to companies and associations of companies of all sizes and from all countries, it aims to contribute to solving water challenges by making Private Sector know-how and experience available to the international community. It brings together more than 300 water companies that serve hundreds of millions of people in 40 countries.

In Europe, AquaFed is present through its members in the majority of EU Member States, mostly by means of PPP (Public-Private Partnerships, including concession-type) contracts and through contracts with industrial water-users. The third of the European population benefits from water or wastewater services that are at least partially operated by private or public-private companies. The majority of these people is served by companies represented by our Federation (See www.aquafed.org/page-7-98.html).

Alternative proposals to implement the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation in the European Union

Include the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights.

The 28 EU Member States took part in the UN process recognising the Right and are signatories to the International Treaty that includes it (*the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*). Nevertheless, the European Union has not yet formally recognized this Right.

In March 2013, AquaFed called on the European institutions to include the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights. This would contribute to making this Right more visible and would create an incentive and example for governments to make it effective in all its dimensions to all individuals across Europe and beyond.

Organise regular reporting on human right to water indicators

As indicated in the General Comment 15 to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, "*Indicators should address the different components of adequate water (such as sufficiency, safety and acceptability, affordability and physical accessibility), be disaggregated by the prohibited grounds of discrimination, and cover all persons residing in the State party's territorial jurisdiction or under their control.*"

The Union could decide that the current national reporting by EU Member States through the Water Information System for Europe (WISE) system be extended to include reporting on all these Right to Water indicators.

In addition, all Member States could decide that all public authorities in charge of components of the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation report annually both on progress made within their jurisdictions and on targets fixed for all their operators, whatever their status.

Increase transparency and accountability of water services through transparent benchmarking for all

The UN General Assembly resolution, adopted on 19 Nov 2013, called upon States "*to provide for effective accountability mechanisms for all water and sanitation service providers to ensure that they respect human rights*".

Today, not all EU citizens can easily access information on the quality of their drinking water and on the performance of their water services. In many cases, this information does not exist, is not reported, or is not available to the public.

In particular, benchmarking systems should be improved in EU countries. While national benchmarking systems in France and the United Kingdom are fully transparent to the public and to academic research, several other benchmarking systems are closed to the public, which means that water-users and citizens cannot apply pressure to their water suppliers to improve their performance.

The transparency and the accountability of water services would be enhanced significantly if all public water systems, all public water authorities and all of their operators, whatever their status - were required to disclose regularly through Internet and other appropriate means, comparable data on key economic, human rights and other performance indicators.

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