



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

United Kingdom of Northern Ireland and Great Britain

National Explanation of Position on Human Rights Council Resolution 15/14 of 30 September 2010

The United Kingdom regrets that it has to dissociate itself from consensus on this resolution today, and would like to take this opportunity to explain our position.

This resolution recalls and reproduces text from General Assembly resolution A/RES/62/292 of July 2010, on which 41 States, including the UK, abstained. The resolution also expresses a recognition of – quote – the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation – end quote - which the UK cannot support.

We regret that our many attempts to find language that would accommodate everyone's position in this resolution were not sufficient. Nonetheless we did not want to prevent consensus.

Neither a right to water nor a right to sanitation has been agreed upon in any UN human rights treaty.

The United Kingdom does consider that there is a right to water, which is an element of the right to an adequate standard of living in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights. However, the UK considers there to be no basis in international law for recognising a human right to sanitation.

The adoption of this resolution today does not change our position in this regard.

If a human right to sanitation is proclaimed without international consideration of what that right comprises, it creates unhelpful ambiguity. In particular, there is no clear, internationally agreed definition of sanitation. Hence the individual cannot know what they can legitimately claim from the State and the State can have no clear understanding of what protection they are obliged to afford the individual.

The UK is clear that inadequate sanitation has a negative impact on the protection of human rights – for example the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

Indeed, the UK understands drinking water and sanitation underpin all aspects of human and economic development. We place a very high priority in supporting developing countries to provide clean water and sanitation as part of achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

We very much hope that progress will be expedited in meeting the MDG targets on water and sanitation and welcome the renewed focus they have been given by the High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly on the Millennium Development Goals in September.

The policy priority we all attach to improving sanitation should not lead us to a misdirected effort to recognize a new legal right without due regard to the structure of international human rights law. While the intent behind recognizing new rights may be noble, doing so without proper consideration undermines the UN's human rights project and could ultimately devalue the notion of human rights as a whole.