

The cultural, economic, and health implications of water sharing

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Abstract

Access to clean drinking water is widely considered a fundamental human right. But many people, especially those living in urban settings and market economies, face water insecurity, borne of political and economic inequality. Water sharing – defined as the exchange of water among households – is so widespread that it could be regarded as a grassroots practice to ensure a human right to water. Despite its clear importance, however, there's been little research into the practice. New research in WIREs Water aims to fill this void. This global study highlights a number of factors that appear to shape who shares water with whom, and why. Researchers found that water sharing offers insight into the everyday and, at times, invisible ties that bind people and households to one another. Water sharing isn't simply a fleeting charitable impulse – the practice depends on specific livelihood strategies, spiritual beliefs and cost/benefit calculations. For example, many cultures have complex institutions that ensure everyone has enough water to meet basic needs. Other cultures share water to uphold religious beliefs and the symbolism of water, such as in Christian baptism and Islamic prayers. This study illuminates how water sharing impacts everything from human exploitation and public health to the potential for alternative economies. Wutich, A., et al. Household water sharing: A review of water gifts, exchanges, and transfers across cultures. (2018) WIREs Water