“Getting” water can mean several different things. It can mean ensuring enough water, which we addressed in Part 2 of our course. It has two other meanings as well—that of bringing enough water close enough to those who need it so that it can be used relatively easily in sufficient quantity, AND that of making water affordable. In Less Developed Countries or LDC, problems of water availability directly affect specific communities, households, and families, and most particularly, the women in these communities, households, and families who must provide the water.

Part 3 of this course is titled Availability quite deliberately. It encompasses the different notions of accessibility (over distance) of water, the affordability or cost of water, and equity or rights to water. This latter consideration rather complicates our thinking about acquiring water. Traditional thinking about water as a common resource is being encroached upon by a view of water as a commodity to be owned and sold. This change in perspective has given rise to the consideration that it is now necessary to explicitly assert a human right to water to supplement customary informal views. Please examine the treatment of this issue by Sandra Postel in “A Water Ethic” (1992) and by Peter Gleick in “The Human Right to Water” (2007).

Water is a political issue. In saying this, I am not referring to water agreements and disputes between countries and regions. I am expressly referring to individuals, communities, and organizations of a smaller scale. Limited access to water and limited control over water issues parallels and is part of the general disenfranchisement experienced by poor people in less developed countries (LDC). In his article “Poverty and Environmental Degradation: Challenges Within the Global Economy,” Akin L. Mabogunje makes the case that good governance in LDC is crucial to both poverty alleviation and environmental protection and explains that it requires three basic conditions: decentralized and devolved authority structures, inclusiveness and participation in decision making, and accountability of the government and transparency of its policies. The same can be said for political decision making on water concerns.

Water is also a social and cultural issue. To a great extent, this derives from the traditional division of labor that characterizes traditional cultures. Women’s domestic functions that involve water—drinking, cooking, washing, and laundry—place the burden of acquiring water on them, in very direct and physical ways. If water is not available in the house, it is women and girls who transport it there from streams, wells, or fountains. This is often done over considerable distances, and by hand—tiring work that can have little to show for itself given the quantities of water needed for eating, bathing, washing, and hygiene. The physical capacity of women and girls is thus often an actual constraint on how much water is available for household needs. I don’t intend this to be an argument for installing indoor plumbing in every house in poor countries, although I think that is a very good idea and one that would vastly improve the quality of life of families, especially their female members. But even simply
bringing public or community water somewhat nearer to dwellings eases the burden of carrying water and thereby increases the actual amount water at hand in the house.

So, what can we say? Water, seen by all as a natural phenomenon, and made available by human technology, is not solely a natural or technical phenomenon. Water in society and water in communities is very much defined by human culture, tradition, and rules.