

EDITORIAL

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Our planet is an enclosed system when it comes to entrance and exit of matter in significant amounts. Water and oxygen are existing in enormous quantities, but both substances are limited to the amounts that have been present on Earth since the Quaternary Period. However, the strength of life is extraordinary and unforeseeable, and when facing shortage or even lack of certain essential substances, surprising evolutionary mechanisms are set in motion in order to ensure its own continuity.

Thales from Miletus (636 –546 B.C.), a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher - who is often considered the first philosopher and the father of Western philosophy - stated that “Hydor (water) is the beginning of everything”. As a matter of fact, our life begins in water, which, by its very nature, is a source of life. People have always had to deal with the need of having enough water for their uses and subsequently to manage appropriately the produced wastewater. The availability of high quality water, as well as safe management of the produced wastewater, have been a prerequisite for urban development in every part of the world. This intuition of the first pre-Socratic philosopher has been confirmed by modern science which considers water and its cycle the basis for life on our planet and recognizes it as what differentiates Earth from other planets in our system.

It has to be agreed that, since air and water are essential to life, they should be considered common goods of nature – goods that belong to all humanity and all living beings. There is no doubt that air is for everyone and belongs to everyone. Therefore, given its diffusivity, it has occurred to no one to use air distribution as an instrument of power. Water is at the center of economic and social development: it is vital in order to maintain health, grow food, generate energy and create jobs while sustaining the natural environment. However, a fair and equitable global water management is far from being achieved.

The most severe outcome of water scarcity is drought. Drought impacts lives and livelihoods through many different dimensions, including food insecurity and land degradation. In the case of prolonged drought coupled with degraded agricultural land, people might move to nearby fertile rural

areas or to urban areas in order to access basic services, including water supplies. As recalled in the subsequent article on “Water and Migration”, drought-related migration has long been a hidden category of migration due to the challenges of data collection. Although no global estimates are available on the number of people moving solely because of water scarcity and/or drought, context-specific data is becoming available in a diverse range of countries (e.g. Angola, China, Iran, Uganda) with water insecurity being identified as a key push factor to migrate.

The vital necessity of water to humanity can also be translated in its strategic importance for the establishment and maintenance of peace in the world. As elaborated in the article “Water as a Path towards Peace”, water is a dimension of what is referred to today as resource security. As early as 2450 to 2400 BC, surface water was diverted by Urlama, King of Lagash, and his son, to deprive the neighboring land of Umma and its city of Girsu of water¹. This border region, also known as Gu’edena (edge of paradise) which was the scene of conflict for centuries, is located in what is now southern Iraq. Sadly, the latter is still a region of water insecurity nowadays. World War II exemplified the manipulation of surface water for military objectives. Conflicts over water resources have been numerous in history, and new ones may occur in the future, especially given the new arising challenges human beings are facing during this century: the change in demography having as a consequence the increase of water, food and energy needs; climate change with its disastrous consequences in terms of water scarcity and natural disasters; new non-State actors and armed groups enhancing violence and conflicts and using water as a weapon in order to make enemies suffer and to force entire communities to be displaced.

More importantly than water being a cause of conflict, it is a factor of cooperation, establishing and maintaining peace in the world. However, water cooperation should not be understood as the absence of conflict, but rather “various forms of cooperation over water occur [...] alongside various forms of conflict. Moreover, tensions over shared waters are too sophisticated and complex to be adequately categorized as either conflict or cooperation”².

As stated by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation, Mr. Leo Heller, at the 71st session of the UN General Assembly, development cooperation funding is estimated to be insufficient to achieve the water, sanitation and hygiene targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, while more funding is truly required, it is also important that development cooperation takes into consideration the comprehensive nature of water and sanitation services. For outcomes to be effective and sustainable, States need strong legal, regulatory and policy frameworks for the water and sanitation sector that are in line with the human rights to water and sanitation. Inadequate policies, planning and management of services can seriously

impair the effectiveness of development cooperation funding, preventing it from reaching those most in need and from being sustainable. Thus, partner Countries must create an enabling environment for development cooperation while observing their human rights obligations.

As recalled in the first article on “Water and Human Rights”, during the last decades - and with particular reference to the debates related to the fight against poverty, conservation and exploitation of ecosystems, or renewable and non-renewable resources - the crucial role of water in development processes, as well as in the strategies of international cooperation, has absolutely been expanded and recognized as a key issue for international law. This awareness was enhanced for the first time by the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat I) that was held in Vancouver (Canada) in 1976, followed by initiatives such as the UN decision to call the “Water for Life” Decade (2005-2015), with the creation, in various Governments and International Organizations, of programmes dedicated to its complex issues. These initiatives paved the way for the launch of policies, strategies and actions by States and International Organizations aimed at dealing with the complex problematic of water, such as: safety and quantity; affordable quantitative, responsible and sustainable use; as well as loss and waste of this resource.

Many water related issues are closely linked to international trade; with increasing trade between nations and continents, water is more frequently used to produce exported goods. Therefore, the competition for water – between water ‘uses’ and water ‘users’ – increases the risk of localized conflicts and continued inequities in access to services, with significant impacts on local economies and human well-being. Persistent poverty, inequitable access to water supply and sanitation services, inadequate financing, and deficient information about the state of water resources, their use and management, impose further constraints on water resources management and its ability to help achieve sustainable development objectives. The article on “Trade and Water” highlights how water clearly falls not only in the human rights legal framework, but also within the international trade legal framework, although through different approaches. While trade may be viewed as an opportunity for a Country’s growth and for the advancement of these human rights, the State must ensure that trade activities do not result in negative human rights impacts. In fact, water is intrinsically connected to basic human rights such as the right to life, to food, to health and to adequate standard of living.

However, even if the right to water is now indirectly recognized in international texts, it does not exist as a right per se. The recognition of rights must be met by a universal responsibility for action. This implies changes in lifestyle, production and consumption, as well as the development of renewable and clean energy. The provision of safe water in necessary quantities and the collection of wastewater and its disposal by

environmentally adequate means, contribute to the care of our common home and people's dignity, whilst also contributing to the development of responsible citizenship amongst present and future generations. Although the challenge is great, we rely on solidarity and collective sensitivity, fruits of the dialogue of philosophies, knowledge, spiritualities and epistemologies. There are currently many valuable projects and initiatives working towards the care of our common home, as shown in the article on the experiences of faith-based organizations.

The right to water is a basic human right and a central issue in today's world. It is an issue that affects everyone and is a source of great suffering in our common home. Looking ahead and at the work done over the last years, the International Community is called to continue its action in finding practical solutions capable of surmounting selfish concerns that prevent everyone from exercising this fundamental right. Water needs to be given the central place it deserves in the framework of public policy.

His Holiness Pope Francis invites us to remember that "our right to water is also a duty to water. Our right to water gives rise to an inseparable duty. We are obliged to proclaim this essential human right and to defend it – as we have done – but we also need to work concretely to bring about political and juridical commitments in this regard"³. Water management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners and policy makers at all levels. Both, men and women should be involved and have equal voices in managing water resources and sharing the benefits that come from sustainable water use. In achieving the 2030 Agenda, water concerns of the poor become the concerns of all in a prospective of solidarity. This solidarity is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, to the good of all and of each individual⁴. It presupposes the effort for a more just social order and requires a preferential attention to the situation of the poor⁵. The same duty of solidarity that rests on individuals exists also for nations: advanced nations have a very heavy obligation to help developing Countries.⁶

NOTES

1. Hatami, H. and P. Gleick. 1994. Chronology of conflict over water in the legends, myths, and history of the ancient Middle East. *Water, war, and peace in the Middle East. Environment* 36(3): 6 Available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1936-704X.2012.03130.x/full>
2. Zeitoun, M., and Mirumachi, N. (2008), 'Transboundary water interaction 14 reconsidering conflict and cooperation', *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 8(4) in Hanasz, P., *Understanding water cooperation and conflict* Global Water Forum www.globalwaterforum.org
3. Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Conference on the Human Right to Water Pontifical Academy of Sciences 23 February 2017
4. Cfr. Note of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, presented Saturday in the 3rd World Water Forum in Kyoto, Japan, entitled "Water, An Essential Element for Life."
5. Cf. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, §38-40 and Second Vatican Ecumenical Council *Gaudium et spes*, §100.
6. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Gaudium et spes*, §86.