

A new water culture

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1- The breakdown of aquatic ecosystems

Water scarcity is often presented as the most serious issue of the 21st century. The problem, however, is not strictly one of scarcity in terms of quantity but rather of quality. The Earth, the Blue Planet, should be known as the Water Planet. Water, the soul of the life in this planet, is abundant in the biosphere. Even so, we are witnessing the tragic consequences of one of the most serious ecological crises ever known to man: *the ecological crisis of continental water ecosystems*. The fact that over 1.1 billion people do not have guaranteed access to drinking water, whilst the health of planet's aquatic ecosystems is breaking down, with the highest levels of biodiversity crisis within the biosphere, are the two faces of the same coin. This ecological crisis, in fact, has prompted the emergence of growing social and political conflicts worldwide.

2 - Why do we talk about New Water Culture?

Taking on the challenge of confronting this crisis requires far-reaching changes in our scales of values, our conception of nature, our ethical principles, and in our lifestyles; in short, there is a need for a cultural change that we have termed the birth of a New Water Culture. A New Culture that must assume a holistic approach and recognize the multiple dimensions of ethical, environmental, social, economic, political and emotional values embodied in aquatic ecosystems.

3- Poverty and climate change: catalysts of the humanitarian crisis on the way

All the communities have located their villages and towns close to a river, a lake, a spring or in areas where groundwater can be supply from wells. The problem comes when the health of these ecosystems has been broken. First fishes die and then people began to get ill and even die too; people from poor communities that have not the means for mitigating the consequences of this ecological crisis on public health. Furthermore, the impacts of big dams, abusive abstractions and massive pollution has degraded and collapsed fisheries and other food sources basic as livelihood of many communities. In short: Unsustainability & Poverty lead to catastrophic synergies addressing water issues.

With respect to the climate change, there is a broad consensus as the foreseeable rise in average temperatures in the biosphere and relatively precise expectations as to the increase in plant evapo-transpiration in general, affecting substantially river levels and demand for irrigation, specially on arid and semi-arid regions.

There is also a broad consensus over the general forecast of increasing variability in rainfall levels which, in many places, will produce an increasing frequency and intensity of extreme events of drought and river-swell.

4- Wrong policies from international institutions

Climate variability and the declining trend in precipitations in regions such as the Mediterranean, is tending to re-launch old structuralist strategies in order to increase

regulation, riverbank reinforcement and channelling, worsening the ecological crisis of aquatic ecosystems.

On the other hand, from the globalization model in force, our limitless consumerist ambition, aggravated by the climate change impacts, is turning save fresh water into an increasingly scarce asset. This has been used as the base to promote the privatization of water supply and sanitation services, under the market laws, in the name of modernity and efficiency.

The World Bank and other international institutions have assumed this double approach, advancing a sort of hydro-schizophrenic policy: on the one hand they promote traditional and obsolete supply-side strategies, financing hydraulic mega-infrastructures, charging the investments on the public debt of impoverished countries; and on the other hand they enhance privatization processes with respect to supply and sanitation services in the big cities of these countries. Huge public investments, without any economic rationality, are promoted, and at the same time public capacities with respect to drinking water and sanitation services are reduced promoting privatization and deregulation on behalf of economic rationality, under the logic of market. This double and contradictory logic, led by the interests of powerful transnational lobbies, is misleading the diagnosis and worsening the environmental & social water crisis all over the world.

5- Perspectives and alternatives from the New Water Culture

From the *New Water Culture*, achieving sustainability, equity and democratic governance in water management is the challenge for the international community in the 21st century. The urgency of assuming this approach is at present strengthened by the perspectives of climate change.

Through specific study of each region, the priority must be based upon restoring and conserving the ecological fitness of water ecosystems and their surroundings. The wetlands, lakes, rivers and aquifers constitute complex and flexible systems that are capable of absorbing and cushioning the impacts of climate changes more successfully than inflexible and impressive strategies based on major new hydraulic works. Conserving and even reinforcing the resiliency of ecosystems is the key for enhancing inertial capacities preventing dramatic changes in the natural water cycle.

The principle of prevention must underlie responses to foreseeable events (for instance, the growing demand for irrigation, arising from increased evapotranspiration). Nevertheless, many of the elements of climate variability and the changes which are taking place, such as in rainfall patterns, are highly uncertain, invalidating reliable forecasts in space and time. Under these conditions, even if reliable forecast cannot be made, a cautious, responsible and well-reasoned approach must be taken; it is a question of managing risk from the standpoint of the precautionary principle.

Demand Management and Conservation Strategies are the approaches that offer greatest flexibility and efficiency for managing periods of drought and flood risk.

On the basis of the universal principle of respect for life, rivers, lakes, wetlands and aquifers must be considered as the *Heritage of the Biosphere* and must be governed by communities and public institutions in order to guarantee a democratic and sustainable management. In any case, the new governance perspective proposed from the New Water Culture asks for a new ethical approach.

6- New Ethical approach

The diverse functions and uses of water are related to so many different scales of value that we need to distinguish different categories in order to establish suitable priorities, rights and management criteria:

- *Water for life*, as regards its basic role of providing survival for both human beings, as a human right (access at least to save drinking public fountains), and all other living beings in nature, must be recognised as a top priority and guaranteed on the basis of *principle of efficacy*.
- *Water for general interest services*, preserving health, social cohesion and equity, must be ranked at a second level of priority; connected with the social rights of citizens and with society's general interest (domiciliary water supply and sanitation services) it must be governed by the *principle of social efficiency* from new participative public governance approaches.
- *Water for economic growth*, as regards its role in legitimate economic development for production and private interest, must be recognised as a third level of priority, in connection with the individual right to improve the standard of living, and must be managed efficiently, following the *principle of economic rationality*.

6- Global and urgent challenges on water for UN.

Access to drinking water and sanitation has been recognised explicitly as a Human Right in General Commentary no. 15 of the UN Committee of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2002). Such formal recognition clarifies previous considerations but is insufficient. A more solemn declaration together with specific engagements under highest priority is needed.

30-40 l/person/day of save drinking water represents only 1,5% of the total water used by our global society at the beginning of the twenty first century. Scarcity of water cannot be accepted as a real problem when we confront the challenge of guarantying, at least, a public drinking fountain, with save drinking water, for free and close to the home of everybody (Nobody will carry more than 30-40 l/person/day from these fountains; water is too heavy).

Beyond this human right to basic services of drinking water (public save drinking fountains) and sanitation, the access to domiciliary services must be considered as a citizen right, linked to citizen duties and adequate tariff systems under participative governance. This approach ask for considering domiciliary water and sanitation services as a *basic public service of general interest*, and not as a simple *economic service*. UN must assume the challenge of debating and establishing a framework of *global citizenry* in which should be included this right to water and sanitation domiciliary services.

Finally, as fresh water has gradually become a tool of power and business, international tensions and conflicts over water are growing. Water is a banner with an enormous symbolic force that can be manipulated to incite confrontation between neighbouring peoples. However, such confrontations never result in effective and stable solutions in the medium and long term. The New Water Culture is a culture of peace, based upon the values of dialogue and involvement. It is therefore imperative that UN gives urgent impetus to legislation and to institutions with the necessary authority and resources to mediate in international conflicts

over water. This is, in essence, a question of promoting an international distribution of available resources and conservation of the natural water cycle, and an enduring and equitable legal order that will guarantee the bases of sustainable and equitable river basin management