

FAITH-BASED NGOs PERSPECTIVES ON WATER ISSUES

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Abstract

Faith-based NGOs find it important to address the issues of water protection, management and equitable distribution. They emphasise the connection between spiritual commitment and social and ecological practice. The paper examines statements and actions by faith-based NGOs on water issues such as water scarcity, sanitation, water resources management, water-related disasters, pollution, water-related conflicts and gender issues. Christian organisations are the main focus; however Jewish and Muslim contributions are mentioned. The paper argues that the perspectives of faith-based NGOs reflect well the complex physical, social, cultural and spiritual dependence of the human community on water. Faith communities – driven by values, not by profit – are well-placed to take a long-term view of the world's resources. They offer views on water that should be carefully listened to by water consumers as well as policy makers on national and international levels.

1. Introduction

Rarely is the interconnectedness of society and environment so obvious as it is in relation to water. Human biological life is determined by water - more than a half of our organisms is water. Historic development of humanity has also been strictly dependant on water. The start of civilisation is ascribed to the settlements in the Tiger and Euphrates valley where fertile river-deposited sediment and readily available water enabled secure food supplies (Green 2003: 1).

Water is much more than an ordinary good. It is an element essential for life. Without water and its particular qualities, biological life as we know it would be impossible. Presence of water in the liquid form is a necessary condition for the existence of life. Water is literally a elixir of life, a *Lebeselixir* as Goethe has called it. Water constitutes a significant part of organs, tissues and fluids of all living organisms including human. An adult human being is in 45-65% made of water. Substantial decrease in water intake by a human has rapid and severe consequences: hallucination, jactitation, coma, fever, distortion of blood circulation and eventually death. While a human can survive 45 to 55

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days without food, she/he will die after 4 or 5 days without water (Garagunis: 2003: 62).

Questions related to water are being intensively discussed at various international fora. Issues such as water scarcity, sanitation, water resources management, water-related disasters, pollution, water-related conflicts and water-related gender issues, are of vital interest for numerous inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations. Among them there is a number of faith-based NGOs. They present a distinguishable ethical, economic and political perspective on water issues.

In the context of the UN Decade on Water the activity of a plethora of civil society actors – including faith-based bodies – interested in water issues may be observed. The paper focuses on the faith-based NGOs and their unique perspectives on water issues which stems from the central place water occupies in their belief systems. The significance of water is twofold. Firstly, water is perceived as the cradle and source of life. Secondly, it is one of the most potent bearers of cultural and spiritual meanings, being an indispensable element of religious rituals.

Therefore, faith-based NGOs find it important to address the issues of water protection, management and equitable distribution. They emphasise the connection between spiritual commitment and moral social and ecological practice. The work examines statements and actions by faith-based NGOs on water issues. Christian organisations are the main focus, however the contributions of other monotheistic religions (Judaism and Islam) are also mentioned. It identifies the following issues that are raised by faith-based NGOs in relation to water: water as a human right, water as a private good, commodification of water and privatisation of water sources, inequality in water access and consumption, Indigenous Peoples' and vulnerable communities' right to water, democratic control of water resources, community-based initiatives in solving water problems, water in international trade agreements, national and international legal protection of water and the right to water, responsible water consumption.

Sustainable development requires meeting the current needs in such a way that does not limit the ability of the future generations to meet their needs. In other words, one strives for a life quality improvement that may be borne by the earth system and that is understood in a wider sense than only income increase. Sustainable development may theoretically be achieved even where there is no economic growth but where non-material factors boost the quality of life. (Kundzewicz 2000: 11, 84). Faith-based NGOs – taking into account not only economic but also ethical, social, cultural and religious aspects of human life – call for a life quality increase harmonious with the concept of sustainable development.

2. Main actors in the international arena

There is a considerable fragmentation as far as the water related work of the inter-governmental organisations is concerned. There is no single international water organisation that deals comprehensively with all issues related to water. Nevertheless the water question is tackled from different perspectives by a number of UN specialised agencies: World Meteorological Organisation (WMO), United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP, with programmes such as GIWA – Global International Water Assessment) , World Health Organisation (WHO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

From among the plethora of NGOs dealing with the issue one may highlight the World Water Council¹ which is an international intergovernmental and NGO network dealing with water policy topics, Global Water Partnership² gathering all those involved in water management: government agencies, public institutions, private companies, professional organisations, multilateral development agencies and the Ecumenical Water Network³ which is a global initiative of the World Council of Churches pooling together Christian churches and organisations around the issues of water.

3. Water crisis today

Water needs grow faster than the earth population. Global water demand has grown 35 times in the last 300 years. In the XX century the world population grew three times, global industrial production 50 times and water consumption almost seven times. Nowadays, 6 billion people consume ca. 3800 km³ of water per year and produce 450 km³ of waste water (Kundzewicz 2000: 24-27). At the same time, 17% of the world population (1,1 billion) have no access to safe drinking water and 42% (2,6 billion) lack basic sanitation facilities (UN Millennium Project 2005: 1). This “silent humanitarian crisis” takes away about 5 million lives every year. 80% of all diseases and about 1/3 of all deaths in developing countries are caused by the lack of access to safe water.

The international community is waking up to the water and sanitation crisis. The UN Millennium Summit in September 2000 gave birth

¹ [Htp://www.worldwatercouncil.org](http://www.worldwatercouncil.org)

² <http://www.gwpforum.org>

³ <http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/earthdocs.html#water>

to the Millennium Development Goals. Among them was target 10, to cut in half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water. At the World Summit for Sustainable Development in 2002, this target was expanded to encompass basic sanitation (UN Millennium Project 2005: 4).

Water is a resource crucial for sustainable development, indispensable for human health and well-being. In order to affirm the importance of water in the life of the whole planet, the General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed the years 2005 to 2015 as the International Decade for Action 'Water for Life'. The Decade reminds the international community that water is a strategic issue for overcoming poverty, alleviating hunger and for achieving development. The connection between development and water management is clearly pronounced (World Water Council 2000). Kofi Annan, former United Nations Secretary-General once stated: "We shall not finally defeat AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, or any of the other infectious diseases that plague the developing world until we have also won the battle for safe drinking water, sanitation and basic health care."

4. Christian approach

In Christian tradition water carries a rich spiritual, ritual and symbolic meaning. This finds expression in theology and liturgical traditions of all churches. Water plays a significant role in many narratives of the Bible; water purifies, heals, quenches thirst, extinguishes fire (Vischer 2003). In the Judeo-Christian Holy Book, God is presented as the source of living water beside which the just man finds life. We should remember that the Bible was written in a region of the world where water is scarce. It is therefore not surprising that water features so significantly in the lives of the people. Because of the scarcity of water in the lands of the Scripture, rainfall and an abundance of water was seen as a sign of God's favour and goodness (PCJP 2003). The spiritual meaning of water can be synthesised in the following points (Garagunis: 2003: 69):

- Water is connected with the beginning of Christian life when the faithful enter the church by baptism;
- Water plays an essential role in the celebration of the Eucharist by which Christians unite with Christ;
- Water is the basic element of all rites whose purpose is to bless the whole human person (body and soul).

Problems related to water are expected to gain in intensity as this scarce resource will be needed to cater for the needs of an increasing number of people. Is there then a way to deal them? Successful approach to this challenge ought to embrace the following aspects:

- physical (changes in land use, demographic developments, climate change);

- economic (instruments to improve water use efficiency);
- institutional and organisational (sharing and common management of resources);
- legal (strong national and international legal framework for peaceful and equitable use of water);
- social (participation in the decision making processes);
- educational (increasing social awareness).

Faith-based organisations subscribe to the above mentioned points. They add however that a truly holistic approach should not forget another two dimensions of water:

- cultural (for example: Indigenous People's right to water sources);
- spiritual (understanding water as an element of a special value and meaning).

A number of Christian NGOs, driven by their spiritual convictions, carry out big water related campaigns and development projects. One can mention: Brot für die Welt, Germany⁴, Kairos Canada⁵, Church World Service, USA⁶, Swiss and Brazilian Churches (SEK/CONIC/CNBB/SBK 2005)⁷, National Council of Churches of Christ⁸.

At the level of an individual Christians are called by their churches to adopt a conscious lifestyle and to reduce their water consumption, to avoid purchasing food and goods if their production requires excessive water consumption or leads to depriving people in the countries of the South of water supplies (ECEN 2003; Juriga 2003).

Below is a more detailed description of the key issues and guiding principles addressed by Christian bodies involved in the water debate. The aim of the author is to present them without judging or evaluating. The goal of this paper is informative and analytical and does not aim at persuading the reader towards any particular worldview.

Protection from pollution and the precautionary principle

If water quality is threatened by human action, it is essential to apply the precautionary principle. Preference must be given to smaller local water projects and generally to projects minimizing negative impact on the environment. Churches should insist on the protection of water quality

⁴ http://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/index.php?/279_1668_DEU_HTML.php and <http://www.menschenrechtwasser.de/>

⁵ <http://www.kairoscanada.org/e/action/campaign.asp>

⁶ <http://www.churchworldservice.org/Development/water.html>

⁷ English text at: <http://www.oikoumene.org/index.php?id=2611>

⁸ <http://www.nccecojustice.org/resources.html>

and securing access to clean water for all. Pollution and wasting of water is sin. It is inadmissible that the quality of water be sacrificed to profit. (ECEN 2003)

Education and public participation

World Council of Churches mandates its members to promote "awareness of and take all necessary measures for preservation and protection of water resources against over-consumption and pollution as an integral part of the right to life" (WCC 2006a). Churches should foster the public participation in decisions that have an effect on water management, water distribution, water use and sanitation (ECEN 2003).

Public good, public control, public responsibility

According to many churches water must be treated as a public good. The State must guarantee access to drinking water to the whole population. This guarantee includes fixing an affordable price for water. "Supply must be managed through structures representing all sectors of the population" (WCC 2006b). Decision-making processes, especially with respect to costs of water and water services, must be publicly controlled and transparent. (SEK/CONIC/CNBB/SBK 2005; ECEN 2003). This does not exclude the involvement of the private sector but rather calls for a parity among the parties allowing for informed decisions and sound agreements. "A core concern in private sector involvement in the water sector is to ensure that efforts to achieve a water service that is efficient and reliable do not cause undue negative effects for the poor and low-income families" (PCJP 2003). Where public-private partnership programmes exist in water delivery, governments should ensure that people and environment come before profit (Mshana).

Taking side with the voiceless – right to water a human right

Churches stand on the side those whose rights of access to water are threatened – the poor, marginalized and indigenous people, women (WCC 2006b) or inhabitants of slum areas. Precious ecosystems are voiceless, too, and they must not be deprived of their right to water nor of, their right to life at all. (ECEN 2003) The churches demand "that the human right to water be recognized at the local and international level in the same way as the right to adequate food" and "that the right to water should be regulated through an international convention on water to be adopted by the UN" (SEK/CONIC/CNBB/SBK 2005). World Council of Churches "undertakes advocacy efforts for development of legal instruments and mechanisms that guarantee the implementation of the right to water as a fundamental human right at the local, national, regional and international levels" (WCC 2006) paying special attention to the negotiations on trade agreements.

Community based initiatives and the principle of subsidiarity

The principle of subsidiarity calls for decision-making at the lowest possible level. Preference should always be given to units of management which are within the reach of people and their interests (ECEN 2003) Community based initiatives should enable local people to exercise responsible control, manage and regulate water resources and prevent exploitation (WCC 2006a).

Water and peace

History of human civilisation is abundant with the examples of rivalry and conflicts over natural resources – land, oil, iron ore and other minerals. Now water – an increasingly scarce resource – may become a root cause of many violent struggles. Former UN Secretary General Butros Ghali claimed that the next war in the Middle East would be fought over water, not oil.

Estimated 40% of the world population inhabits the basins of international rivers. Big international rivers such as Indus, Ganges, Mekong, Jordan, Tiger and Euphrates flow across the counties that often suffer from water shortages and have unfriendly relations with neighbouring states. This creates an environment conducive to water-related wars (Kundzewicz 2000: 164).

Churches notice this danger and try to live up to their mission of peacemakers. The IX Assembly of the World Council of Churches committed the member churches to monitor “disputes and agreements related to water resources and river basins to ensure that such agreements contain detailed, concrete and unambiguous provisions for conflict resolution” (WCC 2006a).

Disaster Prevention and Relief

Many natural disasters are in fact man made in their roots, due to inadequate attention to and disrespectful exploitation of the environment. Faith-based NGOs call for a water management policy that addresses the question of water related hazards such as floods, droughts, desertification, tropical storms, erosion and various kinds of pollution. It is the poor who suffer most when they are exposed to such dangers (PCPJ 2003).

5. Water in Judaism and Islam

Like in Christianity, spiritual and symbolic meanings related to water are to be found also in Judaism and Islam. These old traditions are sensitive to water as a condition of life and each acknowledges this fact in its own particular way (Juriga 2003: 21).

Torah makes a clear connection between nature and our responsibility to protect the environment. Many Jewish communities inside and outside Israel use traditional Jewish wisdom to inspire their members to act to protect the environment (including water). There are countless Jewish environmental

organisations but on the international scene there seems to be a lack of Jewish religious voice regarding water issues.

Islam's main religious text, the Quran, mentions the Arabic word for water – *ma'* – some 63 times. Water is further discussed in the *hadith*, the documented sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad. According to Quran, water is a vital social good and a fundamental human right in Islam. Water conservation is explicitly encouraged by the Prophet. Islam sets priorities on who has rights to water. Humans have the priority to quench their thirst. The second is to meet livestock's needs, and the third is to irrigate crops. Islam states that all species are entitled to an amount and a quality of water adequate to their needs. Islamic law sets punishments for those who do harm to the nature (Shore).

Both Jewish and Muslim organisations concentrate their activities on practical water projects on a local or regional scale. Although well organised and often well funded, they display much weaker motivation to influence the international decision and policy making processes as compared to Christian organisations. Nevertheless, there seems to be large potential for cooperation of these three monotheistic religions on the international level as far as water problematic is concerned. Very similar ideologies and theologies backing the water discourse of the three religions should help to elaborate a common faith community voice on water issues. Such a voice would constitute an important and rather influential force in the system of global governance in the XXI century.

6. Conclusion

It should be noted that faith based community is much more than a “voice in the desert” on the water issues. For instance, Christian development agencies, with their combined annual budgets of more than 1 billion USD, contribute in a significant way to social and sustainable development, among others by implementing water-related projects.

Human community is dependent on water, not just physically, but socially, culturally and spiritually. The paper argues that the perspectives of faith-based NGOs reflect well this complex reality. They offer views on water that should be carefully listened to by water consumers as well as policy makers on national and international levels regardless their life philosophies and worldviews. Some sign of this may be already observed. The EU organs admit that “water is not a commercial product like any other but, rather, a heritage which must be protected, defended and treated as such.” (Directive 2000/60/EC)

Faith-based NGOs should be treated as credible partners of local, national and international authorities in solving crucial water issues. Also development

agencies carrying out water projects around the world ought to appreciate the importance of ethical, social, cultural and religious perspectives presented by faith-based NGOs.

An important and attractive element of the sustainable development discourse is the conviction that such a development is at all possible, as opposed to rather gloomy malthusian visions (Meadows and others 1974). However one must be aware that currently the world develops in a manner that by no means may be called sustainable. Nevertheless, faith communities share the bold conviction that sustainable development is possible and is our obligation. Faith-based NGOs – driven by values, not by profit – are well-placed to take a responsible long-term view of the world's resources and their sustainable and equitable stewardship.

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