

Access to water: right or need ?

by Marco Emanuele

Link Campus University

january 23, 2018

What I propose for our today's reflection is a issue (access to water: right or need ?) that has not yet been solved. It is a debate that is still open internationally. It affects the quality of life of entire peoples throughout the world.

Water is an extraordinary paradigm for "reading" globalization. Source of life and fundamental good for life itself, water is also a source of conflict, control and domain (I think, just to give an example, to the historical conflict between Israel and Palestine).

Today I propose a method of reflection starting from the issue of the access to water. First of all, say that access to water is a right or that it is a need radically changes our perspective of analysis. *In the first case, access to water as a right*, it is the State that must guarantee the access to water for every person; in fact, the right must be guaranteed. *In the second case, access to water as a need*, it is each of us who has to satisfy this need by addressing to the market.

It's easy to understand that, in the case of access to water as a right, water is considered a "common good" while, in the case of access to water as a need, water is considered a commodity like any other and subject to the economic laws of the market. My intention is to point out that the consequences can contribute to worsening the living conditions of already poor or very poor peoples.

In 2010 the UN declared water as a universal human right as an extension of the right to life affirmed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

About the UN's goal number 6:

Access to safe water and sanitation and sound management of freshwater ecosystems are essential to human health and to environmental sustainability and economic prosperity.

Progress of Goal 6 in 2017. Some information from UN:

In 2015, 6.6 billion people (over 90 per cent of the world's population) used improved drinking water sources and 4.9 billion people (over two thirds of the world's population) used improved sanitation facilities. In both cases, people without access live predominantly in rural areas.

Effective water and sanitation management relies on the participation of a range of stakeholders, including local communities. A 2016-2017 survey found that over 80 per cent of 74 responding countries had clearly defined procedures for engaging service users/communities in water and sanitation management.

More than 2 billion people globally are living in countries with excess water stress, defined as the ratio of total freshwater withdrawn to total renewable freshwater resources above a threshold of 25 per cent. Northern Africa and Western Asia experience water stress levels above 60 per cent, which indicates the strong probability of future water scarcity.

In 2012, 65 per cent of the 130 countries that responded to a survey on integrated water resources management reported that management plans were in place at the national level.

ODA (Official Development Assistance) for the water sector has been rising steadily, but has remained relatively constant as a proportion of total ODA disbursements, at approximately 5 per cent since 2005. In 2015, ODA disbursements in the water sector totalled about \$8.6 billion, which represents an increase of 67 per cent in real terms since 2005.

Between right and need, the issue of access to water leads us to a framework of complex, non-separable reflections.

First of all, I start from an aspect that I would define as "value". What is the profound value we give to water? Is it a fundamental good for life, a fundamental part of life itself, an essential element or is it a commodity like many others? This is a very important crossroad.

It is clear that our attitude to access to water changes according to how we consider it. If water is a fundamental good for life, the answer can only be that access to water is a right (which must be guaranteed to all); if water is a commodity, the answer can only be that access to water is a need (which everyone must provide to satisfy).

Secondly, from the cultural point of view, the question is: is water a "common good"?

To say that water is a common good means that it belongs to humanity on the planet. Beyond the declarations of principle, which rarely become policies, the expression "common good" calls each of us, communities, peoples, institutions and companies to a more responsible, and shared, approach to water (from personal use to public / private management)

We need to spread a "water culture as a common good" (and the resulting good practices in terms of management – Public/Private Partnerships - and bottom-up participation), explaining that the destiny of water, and of its access for all, is intimately linked to the destiny of humanity and, therefore, to the destiny of each of us.

Third, from the political point of view, the question of access to water concerns first of all the realistic vision that we have about the evolution of our societies and of the planet. I underline the adjective "realistic" because, in this historical phase, States are no longer the only geopolitical actors but they are accompanied, and very often outclassed in terms of "power", by other actors such as multinationals and large NGOs.

So, in fact, who today defines the lines of "water access policy" on a global level? And these lines in which direction are they going? In that of the government of the water cycle (access and management) considering water as a common good, towards the guarantee of a right for all, or in that of the management of water as a commodity, so that everyone can satisfy his individual needs by addressing to the market ?

Fourth, from an economic point of view, we must be very clear. A certainly realistic fact is that of water scarcity; when a good is scarce its economic value increases. The consequence is the definition of water as "blue gold".

My position is critical, not antagonistic. I think that there is a need for a great alliance between all the subjects involved in the "water cycle".

If, on the one hand, we can not deny that water has increasingly become a scarce good, and therefore precious, on the other hand we can not give up the idea of water as a common good.

There is a great debate among the proponents of the so-called "public water" (and of public management) and those who push on the privatization processes.

The true question, I think, is: realistically, if we consider the need to improve the aqueducts, even through new technologies very expensive, who has the financial resources ? Are the public finances of the States able to support these investments? Only in Italy, in terms of necessary investments, the need is around € 5 billions a year.

And again: according to some forecasts, the world packaged water market is expected to reach the \$ 280 billions threshold by 2020.

What I say is that the "numbers" that run around water are extraordinarily important and that the debate can not be reduced to a theoretical clash between antagonistic positions.

We need strategic reflections that are appropriate to each context, favoring the integration between the various subjects and trying, as far as possible, to safeguard the well-being of the populations, above all through the possibility of access to clean water.

My final considerations concern a perspective. From what I have said up to now it is clear that the issue of water can be considered as a very interesting paradigm to "read and understand" the current step reached by globalization and to share realistic views on the globalization that we would like.

The destiny of water is primarily conditioned by the reality of climate change, largely determined by the man and which causes drought, desertification and other negative effects. Migrations due to climatic causes represent a reality.

We come from decades in which we have theorized an unlimited growth and, if we do not want to give up growth, we need to rethink our models looking at the limits that the nature imposes on us and working, at the same time, on both quantitative and qualitative aspects of growth.

In this phase of globalization, in addition to climate change, there is the evidence of growing inequalities within the States and globally. Inequalities affect the living conditions of already poor or very poor populations and the scarcity of water complicates situations that are often already dramatic.

My last reflection, always within the dynamics of globalization, concerns the ability of states to govern the processes of water and, therefore, to guarantee an effective democracy; who does not have access to water, or who lives great difficulties, can participate in the construction of a common and shared horizon of coexistence?

Thank you for your attention

contact: m.emanuele@unilink.it