



The ethical imperative of sustainability in water management

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The access to safe drinking water

The fact that 1,1 billion people cannot take for granted the access to safe drinking water represents the human face of the *crisis of unsustainability* on the continental aquatic ecosystems. Where it was possible to drink, today the most vulnerable communities get sick and poisoned: about 10,000 people, mainly children, die every day.



The biodiversity crisis on aquatic ecosystems

The second social impact of this crisis of unsustainability on aquatic ecosystems is the destruction of fisheries, “the protein of the poors”. This crisis in rivers, lakes, wetlands and marshes affects not only fisheries in freshwater, but also in coastal marine areas

Governance of basic services and Ethics



The present neoliberal model of globalization, far away from any ethical principle, is accelerating the ecological crisis, increasing the inequity gradients and enhancing the problems of governance related with basic water and sanitation services.

Global Water Crisis



We face a *Global Water Crisis* as result of a synergic convergence:

- *Unsustainability* of aquatic ecosystems
- *Inequity and Poverty*
- **Failure on *Governance*** of basic public services

This crisis is aggravated by the *Climate Change*

Unsustainability of Aquatic Ecosystems



- Abusive withdrawal, massive shrinkage in waterflow and drastic alteration of natural regimes
- Environmental impacts of big dams : breakdown of fluvial habitat, collapse of solid flows...
- Wetlands desiccation
- Widescale deforestation and erosion processes
- Massive and systematic biological pollution from urban wastes, and toxic pollution from industry, open-cast mining and even intensive agriculture.

The lack of sanitation



The direct dumping of domestic sewage and the filtering into the aquifers of effluents coming from septic tanks are often the cause of unhealthiness of water. Diarrhoea as a result of drinking water polluted by this kind of waste is, nowadays, the main cause of infant mortality in the world: 4,000 children under the age of 5, every day, in impoverished communities.

Toxic pollution

The massive use of pesticides and chemical fertilisers is often leading to agriculture being the primary source of diffuse toxic pollution.

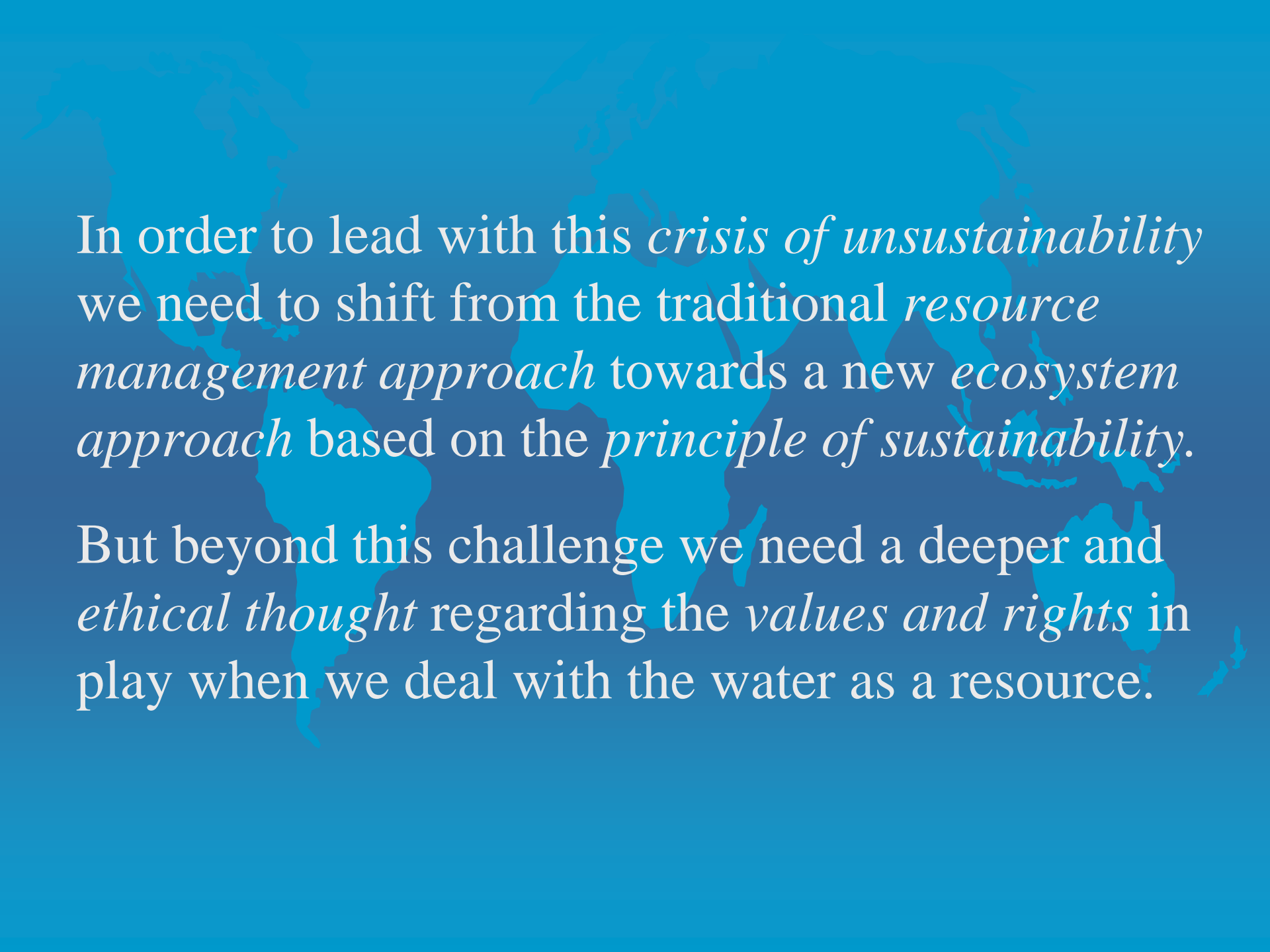
With respect to industry and mining, the absence of international regulations and the lack of laws (or the laxness in complying with these) lead to dumping and obsolete techniques being permitted in impoverished countries, practicing “*environmental*” and “*social dumping*”

Other socio-economic impacts



The crisis in hydrological ecosystems bring with them other serious socio-economic impacts:

- *Destruction of the natural capacities of biodegrading wastes*
- *Drainage of wetlands reduces the inertial natural capacities of reducing flood and drought risks*
- *The breakdown of solid flows (dams) and the increase in sea level (global warming) lead to progressive sinking and salinization of delta areas*



In order to lead with this *crisis of unsustainability* we need to shift from the traditional *resource management approach* towards a new *ecosystem approach* based on the *principle of sustainability*.

But beyond this challenge we need a deeper and *ethical thought* regarding the *values and rights* in play when we deal with the water as a resource.

New Ethical bases: values and rights in play

Wood and Water are renewable natural resources but...

If we were able to make peace with nature (forests and rivers...), in the case of wood, *after guarantying the forest sustainability*, it would seem reasonable to manage the lumber through regulated markets, because it is *consistently exchangeable for money*.

Nevertheless, in the case of water, the *values involved are more complex* and affect *ethical categories* at different levels. This is why *market is not the right tool* for dealing with this *complexity*.

A NEW WATER ETHIC

We need to distinguish functions of water, values and rights, in order to establish priorities and appropriate management criteria

- **Water for Life**

drinking water and livelihood of poor communities, linked with human rights

- **Water for Public Services of General Interest**

linked with citizens rights

- **Water for Economic Development** (above sufficiency)

linked with the production of marketable goods

Water for Life

linked with Human Rights

Top priority under the *principle of efficacy*.

- **Access to safe drinking water as a human right:**

30-40 l/person/day of safe drinking water is only 1,2% of the total water used at present: public drinking fountains, with safe drinking water, for free and close to everybody's home.

- **Life-Water for sustainability :**

Recovering and conserving a Good Ecological Status of aquatic ecosystems have strong links with public health, access to safe drinking water and the fight against hunger.

Water for Services of Public Interest *linked with social rights of citizens*

Second level of priority under the *principle of social efficiency and participative governance*

- Values involved: social cohesion and equity.
- Community & Public responsibility.
- Social participation, empowering people.
- Citizens responsibility and fair tariff system.

**A NEW PUBLIC AND PARTICIPATIVE APPROACH
UNDER SOCIAL CONTROL IS NEEDED**

Water for economic growth

linked with private legitimate rights

- More than 60% of total water demands.
- These demands can never be prior to the ones for life (human rights), including ecosystems sustainability, and services of general interest (social citizen rights).
- It is necessary to assume the basic rules of economic rationality based on *full cost recovery*, including environmental and opportunity costs.
- *Water scarcity*, for economic goals, beyond the level of “sufficiency” and “dignity”, may not anymore be considered as a tragedy but as a part of the reality to manage under *economic rationality*.

NOTE: farming and fishing activities for basic production of food essential to the survival of indigenous and traditional communities should be protected as rights linked to *water-life*

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Unsustainability, poverty and inequity, together with lack of participative governance, are the roots of the lack of safe drinking water and the crisis of biodiversity and fishing.

The *deregulation and privatisation* policies accelerates the degradation of ecosystems and erodes human and citizens rights among the poorest.

Climate Change aggravates the *global water crisis*, increasing risks and vulnerability with respect to droughts and floods .

We need a *cultural and ethical change* based on principles of *Equity, Sustainability and Participative Governance*