Fresh water is a limited resource that today is increasingly sought after. Its natural distribution on earth is not equal in all nations and in many regions of the world it is considered as precious as gold. Drought, pollution, desertification (soil fertility loss) and the effects of climate change are making it increasingly scarce and therefore precious – just like gold! That is why it has become known as “Blue Gold”!

An increasingly crowded and thirsty planet

The problem of water scarcity, already very evident because of the number of people who live on the planet (in 2012 it will reach a historical high of 7 billion inhabitants!), is aggravated by a number of factors. Among these, the continual population growth, bad management of the world’s water resources, pollution and a rapid rise in the request for water (particularly for industry and in urban contexts).

In this scenario, climate change will most strongly affect the poorest nations and therefore the world’s most vulnerable people. Because of the unforeseeable nature of climate change, it will be extremely difficult for developing countries to take the necessary steps to limit the potentially disastrous effects.

How many people today suffer the lack of water?

We all need clean, safe water and yet in the world over a billion people, almost ¼ of the world population, cannot rely on a safe supply of drinking water. Also, it is estimated that almost two and a half billion people do not have access to sewage systems needed for a dignified and healthy life. As a consequence of this, polluted and unsanitary water is used, causing the death of 30,000 people every day. It
is estimated that a child under the age of 5 dies every 3 seconds because of diarrhea. The country where children die most is India, followed by Chad and Afghanistan. Some estimates suggest that in 2025 the number of people with no access to water could rise to 3 billion. These are terrifying statistics upon which we must reflect very seriously indeed.

**Water and disease**
The World Health Organization estimates that 1.8 million children die each year as a direct result of infected water. The Report on “Water and Poverty” compiled by the United Nations in 2006 affirms that 80% of diseases caught by the inhabitants of Developing countries is due to unsanitary water. The main water induced diseases are typhoid, dysentery, gastroenteritis, hepatitis, leprosy, ulcers and malaria. The table below shows how the improvement of the quality of water available to humans could significantly reduce the risk of catching diarrhea based illnesses, among the main causes of child mortality in the countries of the southern hemisphere.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) The scarcity and non-homogeneity of rainfall – today increasingly linked to extreme climate changes that are not conducive to an adequate and regular supply of water.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) The high level of pollution in water used for drinking (in the Third World 90% of waste water goes directly into rivers; the absence of sewage plants causes 250 million to become sick each year).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The **Right to Water**
For many people on the planet it is a perfectly normal thing to drink a glass of water, something they do every day without thinking, just by turning on the tap, buying a bottle of water or drinking from a fountain. For many others, to stock up on drinking water means having to walk for hours, sometimes days. It is not such an easy thing for many people in the world to quench their thirst, yet this is one of the primary needs of our organism.

As a means to improving this very dramatic situation, the United Nations, on the 26th July 2010, declared “the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a basic human right that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights”. This UN resolution (A/64/L.63/Rev.1) marks an important turning point on an international level.

The United Nations effectively recognized and made official the importance of “the equal distribution of safe drinking water and sanitation as a fundamental part in the fulfillment of all human rights”, stressing also “the responsibility of the various nations to promote and safeguard human rights”. With this resolution the UN calls upon all states and international organizations to provide the necessary financial resources, technology and skills that will guarantee safe, clean drinking water and sanitation for everyone.

**A sacrosanct and irreplaceable right**
The recognition that water and sanitation are essential not just for life and health but also for the dignity and prosperity of every human being, constitutes an important historical breakthrough. The UN resolution does not just think of water as something
to drink, but as something necessary towards the fulfillment of all other functions and for a dignified life, avoiding the use of unsanitary and polluted water as much as possible. The Right to Water has therefore been defined internationally as an absolute right, a right that cannot be denied to anyone, just like the right to thought and expression. It is also an irreplaceable right. Without water the human organism can survive for only a few days, because there is no other substance on earth more important for human life than water.

The advantages gained from the right to water. Transparent information and participation
What does this UN resolution lead to in concrete terms for many thirsty people in Developing countries? Although not mandatory for any nation, it still sets out some important new rules. Apart from calling on all member UN states (and in particular the governments of developing countries) to dedicate themselves more wholeheartedly and with more solid national policies towards assuring a fair price and more efficient distribution of water, the assertion of the Right to Water constitutes a unique opportunity for millions of people. It sets out a legal basis which individuals, governments and multinational companies will have to be accountable to, including greater transparency of information, in the form of access to various world forums concerned with water and sanitation, and also the diffusion of decisional processes guaranteed by law which protect transparency and responsibility in national and international choices. Full recognition of the right to water and sanitation means that communities and other organizations can request that those who are responsible for water management fulfill their obligations. It is a fundamental step towards ensuring a legal basis for many users of water. Responsibilization, consciousness raising through participation, and access to information is therefore essential for ensuring the fundamental right to water.

Water and the Millenium Development Goals. The commitment to water
In 2002 the United Nations signed the “Millenium Development Goals”, a major development programme which sees all member UN states united in the commitment to reducing child mortality and to halving the number of people with no access to safe water by 2015. Even if we are still a long way from achieving these ambitious goals, the UN resolution to recognize the Right to Water is an important step forward in the right direction.

Access to water, a problem with no easy solution
In Developing countries, the limited and often disastrous state of the infrastructure, low levels of access to services and networks, and high levels of poverty make it more difficult to reconcile water supply with affordable prices, efficiency of the networks and commercial feasibility. The UN resolution states that governments should be first in line as responsible for making sure that suppliers and market are regulated so as to avoid monopolistic abuse of power, and to offer safe and secure water and sanitation to the poorer members of society. Very thorough national planning is needed to speed up the fulfillment of these objectives. Cases such as South Africa and Brazil demonstrate that when a well planned national strategy is pursued, important results can be achieved. In South Africa for example, the stable national politics of the 1990s set out the goal of supplying 50-60 litres of clean water to every family as well as sanitation. In just under a decade there have been very important results here indeed.

The socially excluded and the poor: the most at risk categories
One thing that is very clear on a world level is that the socially excluded and the poor who live in zones that make access to essential water almost impossible, are the most vulnerable to short water supply. Sometimes communities may even be excluded by national governments who consider them as undesirables. Another problem lies in the spontaneous settlements around Third World megalopolis, the shantytowns, townships and slums. These areas are frequently deprived of water supplies because of political questions or opportunism. However the Right to Water and sanitation forbids discrimination for illegitimate reasons and asks that laws and politicians pay particular attention to vulnerable and excluded groups, people who live in poor suburbs and makeshift housing.

Why do the poor pay more for water than the rich?
In many developing countries across Asia, Africa and South America, the rich people connected to a public water supply pay far less than those who live in poor peripheral areas of the cities and who are obliged to buy water from sellers and transporters. The price of water that is distributed in cisterns is in fact much higher than that supplied by public aqueducts, because it also includes the cost of transport. In general, the price of tap water supplied by an aqueduct is 5 to 10 times lower than the price of the same water sold by private intermediary companies. But why then can’t the poor get connected to a public aqueduct too? Simple! Not only because very often there are no aqueduct pipes to bring them water, but also because in the Third World it is impossible for millions of people to pay for a water meter that costs about 100 dollars! For all these reasons, poor people in many cases are obliged to pay 10 times more for their water than a wealthy person. A true paradox!
If the wars of the XX century were fought over oil, the wars of the XXI century will be fought over water”. This is the historical sentence pronounced by Serageldin, vice President of the World Bank, in 1995, foreseeing a future which will be characterized by water scarcity and the race to try and get hold of it. The control of the water of rivers and underground water bearing strata will assume a fundamental role in the relationship between confining states which share rivers, lakes and water strata. If poor states are involved, this may often turn into full blown wars involving the local populations. It is perhaps pointless to say that many conflicts, foremost that between Palestine and Israel, arise regarding questions of water scarcity and serve only to harm and impoverish people who already find daily subsistence difficult in peace time.

**Table 1.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of Water Confinements</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Illustration 7:** © UNDP (2006), Report on Human Development, see references

Thirty-nine countries obtain water from beyond their national confines.

**Rivers with no confines**

Today more than 40% of the world’s population depends on courses of water that are common to two or more countries.

Most of the water used by Iraq and Syria comes from the rivers Tigris and Euphrates which originate in Turkey. The area where these rivers arise is very important for agriculture, and so Turkey has every interest to exploit these rivers almost exclusively. Bangladesh depends on India for 91% of its water, Egypt is almost wholly dependent on the waters of the Nile.

But this river that is so crucial to Egypt does not originate there, but flows through nine African states before it reaches Egypt. 85% of the Nile is generated by the meteoric water of Ethiopia and flows as the Blue Nile in Sudan before it enters Egypt. The rest of the river comprises the White Nile system, whose origins are located in Tanzania, by Lake Victoria. The White Nile joins with the Blue Nile near Khartoum in Sudan. Recognition on an international level of the existence of the Right to Water also implies the promotion of concrete action to limit potential conflict over war between neighboring states.

**Illustration 8:** © UNDP (2006), Report on Human Development, see references

International water basins link up many countries.

**Illustration 9:** © UNESCO

Projected water shortages in 2025.

**Public and private management of aqueduct services**

As from the 1990s we have witnessed on an international scale the progressive privatization of aqueduct services, especially those of the Third World. The idea that some inefficiencies in the public sector can be remedied by the presumed dependability and better efficiency of private companies, turned out to be a fallacy, as the UN Report on Human Development from 2006 points out. Concrete examples of this are Cochabamba (Bolivia), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Manila (the Philippines) or Porto Alegre (Brazil). In these cases, as in many others, a highly commercialized water market ended up by distributing water of poor quality at very high prices compared to the minimum domestic charge. In most cases, where
privatization of water resources took place, the number of people who gained anything from it is minimal. Some studies show that the cheapest water that can be made available to the poor comes from public aqueducts. Public management tends to be cheaper than private because it is less subject to the different forms of financial speculation implicit in a market mechanisms. The difference between public and private management can be of great importance, in particular for the poorest people in Developing countries.

The debate about the advantages of a public management of water services rather than private management (or vice versa) has turned our attention away from a more serious problem, and that is the frequent inadequacy of water suppliers in the Third World, both public AND private, in the fight to overcome global water scarcity and to provide better access to water for the poor and most vulnerable people.

The right price of water
In Europe, the “right price” of water for the public water supply must first take into consideration the maintenance and efficiency of distribution systems, as well as all the costs necessary for depuration treatments to make water drinkable. Water in itself has no real price, but it is necessary to make charges to cover the management and maintenance costs involved as well as the depuration of used water (sewage etc), indispensable for preventing further environmental pollution. On the basis of all the foregoing and with a view to establishing the “right price” of water, the European Water Directive 2006/60 adopted the so-called “full cost recovery” according to which all necessary costs incurred towards making water drinkable, for its distribution and depuration, should be considered in the bills consumers pay for their water supply.

The future challenges for fairer access to water
Intervention planning on a national level, prudent management, sparing use, reduction of wastage and pollution, active participation and involvement of citizens, are all essential ingredients in a successful recipe for water management. The Right to Water and basic sanitation for all must become a reality in the next few years and not just a declaration of intent, so all human beings can live their life with dignity.

Illustration 10: © UNDP (2006), Report on Human Development, see references
Public service provides cheaper water.

Public or private? The dilemma
The debate about the advantages of a public management of water services rather than private management (or vice versa) has turned our attention away from a more serious problem, and that is the frequent inadequacy of water suppliers in the Third World, both public AND private, in the fight to overcome global water scarcity and to provide better access to water for the poor and most vulnerable people.

Public water ass a Commons: the testimony of the ancient world
In the ancient world, the Greeks and Romans were the first peoples to institutionalize water as a “public good”. Water was considered “res publica” (a public thing) and was distributed by public fountains to which all citizens had access. In the Islamic world too, no one can own water since it is a gift of God. Furthermore, the Koran anticipates severe punishment for anyone who pollutes water. Do you know of any other examples of water as a “common good”. Let us know by writing to info@civiltacqua.org
References


