



Water as a human right

During 23–24 February 2017, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences organized a workshop, The Human Right to Water: An Interdisciplinary Focus and Contributions on the Central Role of Public Policies in Water and Sanitation Management, in Vatican City.

The roots of this academy are in the Academy of the Lynxes (*Accademia dei Lincei*), founded in Rome in 1603. It was the first exclusively scientific academy in the world. It was closed, and then re-established in 1847 by Pope Pius IX, and finally renewed and reconstituted in 1936 by Pope Pius XI. The present academy has interest in six major areas: fundamental sciences, science and technology of global problems, science for the problems of the developing world, scientific policy, bioethics and epistemology. It is multiracial in character and non-sectarian in choice of members. In recent decades it has stressed the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and has shown considerable interest in the ethical and environmental responsibilities of the scientific community.

The workshop was attended by some 80 invited participants from different parts of the world. Among them were leading water experts and development specialists from different religions, as well as theologians. Participants came from different sectors, like government, the private sector, academia, NGOs and labour unions. It was undoubtedly one of the most eclectic groups of participants we have witnessed in any water meeting.

Pope Francis spent about two hours at this meeting interacting with the participants. His address is published in this issue (Francis, 2017).

Pope Francis's encyclical letter *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* was published in 2015 (Francis 2015). This is the most comprehensive document the Catholic Church has produced on the environment. The document assesses not only human impacts on the environment but also the numerous philosophical, theological and cultural causes that are endangering the human relationship with nature as well as to each other.

Normally papal documents are made for church officials and the lay faithful. In *Laudato Si'* (Praise be to You), the Holy Father says categorically that he would "like to enter into a dialogue with all people about our common home". Its goal is to have "a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation that includes everyone, since the environmental challenges we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all."

The pontiff notes that:

a sober look at our world shows that the degree of human intervention, often in the service of business interests and consumerism, is actually making our earth less rich and beautiful, ever more limited and grey, even as technological advances can substitute an irreplaceable irreplaceable beauty with something which we have created ourselves.

In terms of water, the pontiff states categorically that "access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right. It is essential for human survival and, as such, is a condition for the exercise of other human rights." He also notes that freshwater is "indispensable" for "supporting terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems". Further,

Caring for ecosystems demands farsightedness, since no one looking for quick and easy profit is truly interested in their preservation. But the cost of the damage by such selfish lack of concern is much greater than economic benefits to be obtained.

The pontiff's clear and unambiguous focus on *safe, drinkable* water should be noted and welcomed. This is a fresh and welcome statement which contrasts with the consistent obfuscations of the magnitude of the problems by international organizations over the past four decades. The UN agencies and development banks coined a vague and amorphous term in the 1980s: 'improved sources' of water, which has no relation to their quality. Their use of the three terms – 'improved sources' and 'clean' and 'safe' water – interchangeably over the last decades has ensured that people now think the three terms have the same meaning.

Consider the latest UNICEF-WHO report (2016) on the global progress on sanitation and drinking water. In the very first paragraph it mentions "safe drinking water". In the second paragraph, it switches to "improved drinking water sources", thus giving the readers the direct impression that both these terms have the same meaning. Nothing is further from the truth.

The same report then goes on to say that, in 2015, 663 million people still lack "improved drinking water sources". Because of the interchanging use of "improved sources" and "safe water", it is now accepted that 'only' 663 million people in the world do not have access to safe and clean water. Actually, the number of people who do not have access to water that is safe to drink (without any potential health hazards) is probably around 3.5–4 billion, some five times the current UN estimate. This means the world is facing a problem the magnitude of which is very significantly higher than what is believed to be the case today. Consider South Asia, for example, with a current population of over 1.7 billion. With the exception of a part of a medium-size city in India, Jamshedpur, there is not a city, town or village in all of South Asia where people have access to safe drinking water on a 24/7 basis.

In the global discussions on the human right to water, the focus has been almost exclusively on access to certain quantum of water (depending on the city, this now varies from 50 to 150 litres per person per day), and not on whether the water is safe to drink.

Even in terms of quantity, and if the human right to water is to be properly implemented, the first question that needs to be answered is how much water a person needs every day to lead a healthy and productive life. The answer depends on a variety of factors, including culture, climate and lifestyles. Unfortunately, the question itself is generally not asked, let alone answered. Access to a certain quantum of water, whatever its quality may be, has been the focus of the global discussions.

The only study in this area that we are aware of was carried out in Singapore between 1960 and 1970 (Biswas, 1981). It showed that beyond 75 litres, there did not appear to be additional health benefits. This could thus be a reasonable level for developing countries to aim at.

With a strong focus on water conservation, several European cities have now reduced their per capita daily water consumption to between 90 and 100 litres, and the figure is still gradually coming down. Therefore, there are good reasons to believe that they may be able to reduce their daily per capita water consumption to around 80–85 litres by 2030 or so. Thus, 75 litres per person per day could be an appropriate quantity to aim at.

A fundamental issue in terms of water as a human right is quality. Inexplicably, this has been mostly missing from the global discussions. Humans have had access to water one way or another: otherwise they could not have survived. What is needed is equitable access to water that is safe to drink for everyone, irrespective of the economic and social conditions.

It is true that over the past four decades, the world as a whole has made good progress in improving access to water. However, much more needs to be done. Masking facts with obfuscations has been counterproductive since it gives the impression that the problems are being progressively solved, which is not the case. Examples abound all over the world, and ignoring them instead of addressing them properly will only make them bigger. We should look at the billions of people who still struggle to have access to clean water for themselves and their families on daily basis.

Refocusing the global discourse so that it emphasizes water that is *safe* to drink and bringing back to the table discussions that address the enormous problem that it represents will be a first step that could lead to its solution.

We earnestly hope that the pontiff's intervention on the human right to safe water will reorient global discussions and actions so that all humans can have access to water that is safe to drink within the foreseeable future.

References

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