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Paolo Avarello

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edited by Federica Legnani and Michele Zazzi

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Michele Zazzi

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Anna Moretti

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The commitment of the Scientific Community for a New Water Culture
Pedro Arrojo Agudo

The *European Declaration for a New Water Culture*, undersigned in Madrid in 2005 by a hundred experts of the European Union countries, opens with the following statement: "We live in times of crisis in which the international community must pause to reflect and decide which model of global governance we must take on board for the 21th century. We must face up to the ever worsening crisis of social and environmental unsustainability in the world. With reference to water resources, the systematic destruction and degradation of water ecosystems and aquifers has already led to dramatic social repercussions. More than one billion people with no guaranteed access to drinking water, and the breakdown of the hydraulic cycle and health of rivers, lakes and wetlands are two consequences of this crisis".

Sustainability crisis of water ecosystems

Frequently, sustainability is considered to be an asset widely found only in developed countries, and it is generally considered that the economic development of impoverished countries necessarily implies the environmental degradation of its natural heritage and resources as an inexorable tribute to pay. Governments' irresponsibility and lack of democracy, as well as the 'free competition' policy which has been imposed by the World Trade Organization (WTO), enable those countries to pollute water without restraint. Such an approach is deceptive, unjust and unacceptable, especially as far as water is concerned. Economic advantage has turned out to be like

poisoning a population. In these developing countries, where the social and health system is more fragile, the health and life of communities depend more directly upon the good state of water ecosystems. In developed countries the issue of drinking water access has been apparently solved. Yet when we think of what we have achieved and what we have instead lost, we realize that there is something wrong. At the beginning of the Nineties serious environmental damage and economic reasons in the United States led to reassess traditional hydraulic structuralism and supplyside strategies, in order to prioritise demand management and conservation strategies. As to polluted waste, developed countries have enacted ever more restrictive regulations in the last decades, having realized that it's a matter of health. In 2000 the EU issued the *Water Framework Directive*, aiming at recovering and preserving a good ecological status of rivers, lakes and wetlands.

Social and cultural concept of sustainability

In the definition of Brundtland Report we read as follows: "By sustainable development it is meant everything that meets the requirements of present generations without jeopardizing future generations' expectations to meet their own requirements ... but it is not written what is meant by "future generations' requirements". We assume it is about preserving essential conditions for earth's inhabitants (climatic conditions, ozone sphere, inhabitants' health, preservation of soil and wood fertility, biodiversity, etc). There are many global values worldwide, which characterize, locally and regionally, the natural and

cultural heritage that need to be preserved for future generations. Assessing what is important, significant or valuable with regard to places or spots, must be the result of a social building process, which has to be implemented in time through commitment and regulations, according to social sensitivity and different values involved. This sensitivity will depend on ethic and cultural prevailing principles, but also on level of information and full awareness of our actions' future consequences.

The challenge of an interdisciplinary and participatory management

In the information transmission and knowledge spreading of values involved and of issues to be solved, experts' contribution is crucial. The scientific community must be involved in order to foster debate in society without being tolerant towards such things. Water management must stop being only civil engineering's province. It needs to become both interdisciplinary subject and civic issue. Management transparency and public access to all data is essential. This entails public institutions' structural reforms that are often controlled by technocratic and authoritarian structures, mainly sub-ordinated to ruling governments or shadow governments instead of being subordinated to a proper society. The Aarhus Convention constitutes a commitment, demanding a proactive citizen-level participation and going far beyond traditional public information process. It won't be easy, that's for sure, but the technical-scientific community must face this challenge hoping that such decision process will bring knowledge and social awareness.

The need of a new ethical approach in water management

The World Bank and WTO policy on environmental deregulation, liberalization and privatization of public services and environmental resources, is still far from solving global issues such as social injustice, poverty, unsustainability and guaranteed access to clean drinking water. Instead it has worsened the situation of the poor communities, which is still precarious. The *European Declaration for a New Water Culture* suggests a new ethical approach by making a clear distinction between certain categories, in order to set proper priorities and management criteria. Water for life, as regards its basic role of providing survival for both human beings (individual and collectively) and all other living beings in nature, must be recognised as high-priority and guaranteed effectively from the human rights standpoint. Nevertheless the priority to be given to such matter does not explain nor does it justify the lack of financial resources. The 'tap and drinking water revolution' could take place with just 1% of the current military expenses. Water for general interest purposes, as regards its role of preserving health and social cohesion, must be ranked at a second level of priority, under responsible and socially efficient management, and related to the social rights of citizens and the general interest of society. Such right must also be brought into this section, with adequate debate and social consensus. Water for economic growth, as regards its role in legitimate economic development for production and private interest, must be recognised as a third level of priority, in connection with the individual right of all to

improve their standard of living, and must be managed efficiently, following principles of economic rationality.

The management of water economic value for the development

Most water captations from rivers, lakes and water-bearing strata are not carried out because of fundamental functions nor because of life maintenance or general interest. They are carried out instead for productive activities, which cannot be regarded as of general interest nor can they be compared to human rights.

Pure economic goals must be pursued also by applying strict rational criteria based on cost recovery principles, including scarcity value of recycling as well as environmental costs.

Shortage of water for economic enrichment is not to be considered as an accident to be avoided, whatever the involved economic goods (useful and scarce). Such approach does not entail market management. The need for developing a management model that puts ethical principles first, makes market a simplistic and insensitive means to the values involved. Thus it becomes necessary to find a new and modern participative model for public management.

Towards a New Water Culture

By setting out goals and prospects, the *European Declaration for a New Water Culture* wishes that the *Water Framework Directive* worked out effectively: "consider that it will promote sustainable management approaches which are in harmony with the New Water Culture required by the challenges of the 21st century".

The Declaration ends with the wish that the EU, the World Bank and the WTO, in tune with this New Water

Culture, will promote a new model of democratic globalisation based on laws and regulations that guarantee a proper and efficient universal access to drinking water and recovery as well as to water ecosystem sustainability.