

Water Scarcity: A major threat to the international community

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In August 1995 Ismail Sergaldin, serving as World Bank Vice President, warned that *"if the wars of this century were fought over oil, the wars of the next century will be fought over water -- unless we change our approach to managing this precious and vital resource"*. More than two decades after this statement, water scarcity remains one of the most imminent threats to humanity. Fresh water is indispensable for people, ecosystems and life on the planet.

Nowadays, sustainable and reasonable utilization of freshwater resources comes as an imperative, since they are natural resources suffering from overexploitation by human activities and the devastating effects of climate change. It should be noted that only 2.5 percent of the world's water is fresh. The rest is saline and ocean based. Just 1 percent of our freshwater is easily accessible, with much of it trapped in glaciers and snowfields. In essence, only 0.007 percent of the planet's water is available to fuel and feed the whole of humanity.

The vulnerability of freshwater resources is well recognized by the international community. The Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development underlies the vitality of their conservation, while Sustainable Development Goal no. 6 calls states to address water scarcity and ensure access to water for all, focusing on the need to increase water use efficiency across all sectors, sustainable withdrawals and supply of fresh water. In line with the aforementioned, Agenda 21 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development approaches water both as a natural resource as well as a social and economic good, and it states that the users should be charged appropriately.

The negative effects of water scarcity can expand to all aspects of everyday life and extreme weather events can undeniably exacerbate them. Given the interdisciplinary nature of water as a good it becomes clear that human beings, economy and the environment are all affected. Given the relationship between water and human life, water scarcity poses an immediate threat to the protection of human rights. Not only is it the right to water that needs to be safeguarded but also human rights must be secured from water scarcity, since the right to water constitutes a sine qua non condition for the enjoyment of the rest. Who could ever imagine the fulfillment of the right to life without having enough and clean water? Let's think for one moment that water scarcity is able to cause critical food shortages and reduced food production, which can be a tremendous issue especially in arid and semi-arid areas of the planet.

Moreover, *water scarcity is responsible for environmental refugees and migration flows*. It is true that we are witnessing some of the largest refugee flows since the Second World War, explained in terms of water crisis perpetuated by climate change. One fine example of environmental refugees are the Wayuu communities in the desert of Guajira, in the north of Colombia, who suffer from droughts and they are forced to migrate to Venezuela in order to survive. Undeniably agriculture is affected by water shortages and therefore, both social and economic losses can be enormous. Women are particularly distressed, since they bear the traditional role of food carriers for their families and in many areas of the world, they are in charge of water collection.

In the light of the above, water scarcity can also be the basis for *political turmoil*, leading to national and international instabilities. Countries that suffer from depletion in their freshwater resources cannot provide their population with a high standard of living and this is often the source for social rising. The protection of water resources, both in quantity as well as in quality, constitutes a key aspect of *national security* worldwide.

During the last years water linked violence has increased; water problems per se do not create wars. However, they can create threats and pose risks when combined with rapid population growth, poverty and economic inequalities. For instance, in the region of the Middle East equitable water sharing is a major factor for peace. It is estimated that since 1950, almost 80 percent of violent disputes over freshwater have taken place in this area. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers are vital for the economy of the riparian countries and the potential for strife is higher than ever, given that the regions are running out of water as political insecurities increase.

Finally, international water trade is a reality and the circle with water scarcity is vicious. On the one hand, we have the over extraction of water resources to be put in the market and on the other, we have the adoption of necessary measures in order to mitigate water scarcity. These reflect growing pressures on these vulnerable natural resources and a degree of precaution when taking measures, which aim to prevent or deal with a risk posed on human life or health, according to the legislation of the World Trade Organization. In this context potential restrictive measures adopted by states for the conservation of freshwater resources demand careful consideration and balance between the necessity of the measure and trade liberalization.

In the light of the above, water scarcity is an imminent threat that calls for prompt and effective management. Today, the odds are against the environment and consequently, against humanity, judging from the aforementioned negative consequences in every part of society. Recognition of the problem, interstate cooperation and effective policy and action are absolutely necessary in order to reverse the current situation. Water is our planet and our life; it is our duty to protect it.