

(FOR) A WATER DIPLOMACY

How long has water been a key concern for humankind? Since the mists of time, undoubtedly. And closer to us, the genius of irrigation systems in Palmyre or Persepolis, the quality of Roman or Greek aqueducts or so many others, shows that throughout the centuries, mastering water has turned into an obsession. Because without water, there is little room for life and that is the reason why people have always fought over the possession of a well or of a spring.

Later, much later, this awareness started to become universal. And we had to wait until 1972 in Stockholm, and then 1977 in Mar del Plata to see the human community recognise the right for all people to access drinking water to satisfy their essential needs.

Since then, year after year, the UN, its general assembly, its agencies and a majority of States have expressed their will to see water and sanitation issues better taken into account.

This issue can be sum-up with two commonly stated figures: 1.5 billion people do not have permanent access to drinking water and 2.5 billion people do not have sanitary installations at their disposal.

Such a large number of individuals faced with such needs obviously call for a sustainable policy with specific objectives.

Working towards the adoption of a global water policy, it is the *raison d'être* of the World Water Council, created in 1996 : make people accept the idea that there is no human development without water and that decision makers of all sorts must consider its control and distribution as an absolute priority for the decades to come. And this is at the origin of the slogan « taps before guns » expressing this will in a particularly strong way.

The specific objectives were stated when Nations gathered at the Johannesburg Summit for sustainable development in 2002: reduce by half, as of 2015, the number of people who do not have access to drinking water and sanitation.

So much for the setting as it is defined by the leaders of this world: a real awareness, realities that are better understood, identified solutions, but means that are as insufficient as they are unsuited.

Because the road that leads to water for all is still long, if it ever gets anywhere. It is long and winding, with breathtaking precipices and numerous pitfalls. Each of us has to know this. And it's our duty to make it known.

What are the barriers that stand before us?

Fresh water is available on the planet in colossal quantities but it is not necessarily located where people need it most.

The world population is growing rapidly and it is settling and concentrating in a few dozen mega-cities. The availability of water does not correspond there to the needs which stem from these evolutions. Many of these big cities are already or will be suffering from thirst during this century due to the lack of eventually imposed measures which must be adopted rapidly.

The economic activity, mainly agriculture and industry, is at the origin of severe air and water pollution. This threatens the health of billions of human beings. But more important, this activity degrades the quality of the water resources. And to a level that is such that today, when we considering the state of the rivers or groundwater, we can actually talk of a new kind of "sanitary bombs".

And then it is the issue of climate evolution. With extreme media coverage, it is a cause of major anxiety for the populations who perceive a threat but do not always understand the real challenges.

In this field, I think we should both stay vigilant and have a responsible attitude. It is true that we have scientifically observed significant temperature variations during the 20th century with a noticeable acceleration over the last 25 years.

It is true that if we keep the same momentum and make a projection over the first years of the present century, there are of course reasons to worry and to begin to envisage solutions at the scale of the planet.

It is true that obviously the water reserves, their localisation and their state depend on these variations. But we should not mix up the notion of recharge and of overexploitation. Today the latter has a much more severe impact on human activity than the first. This is the case with the Beijing groundwater,

which loses several meters each year, and also with overwatering in some regions of Spain.

It is thus clear that Man remains water's first enemy and that the climate should not be the scapegoat which can lead us to forget about our errors and our incapacity to make the permanent relationship between Man and water evolve.

Because the problem we are faced with today, before being of the technical and financial order, is first and foremost cultural and political. Do we want the men and women who dwell on this earth to remain unequal when it comes to access to water and sanitation? Can we imagine promising our children a world in which they could not drink nor breathe at will?

Obviously not and we all agree and we will not accept this position to be challenged. And accordingly it is no longer a question of priority or urgency but rather a precondition.

Yes, access to water is a precondition. A precondition to life, a precondition to development, a precondition to prosperity, a precondition to happiness.

Air and water are the challenges of the modern world. Human kind will manage to solve the other issues as long as it can survive to the two previous ones. Let's stop thinking about "exciting" wars over water which after being so broadly announced now only stir up the media. Let's prepare the battle for preconditions. A peaceful battle so that legislations, money, governance, knowledge, in short our capacities as much as our intelligence, be first dedicated to solve these preconditions.

How can we achieve this? The answer is obviously not simple because the first task is to convince.

Convince that, everywhere and for all uses, we need to consume less. Not only by taking a shower rather than a bath or by using water saving toilet flushing devices.

The real challenges aren't there. They are in water for agriculture, water for energy and water for industry. That is where the greatest savings lie that can have a substantial impact on the consumption chart. There's an enormous task of awareness-raising ahead of us in which the carrot is mixed with the stick. We will not escape from that and nor will our children or grandchildren. And the youngest among us will surely win this battle in our place.

But this isn't enough because this water needs to be better, much better managed. We must convince of the universal virtues of drop irrigation, detect leaks, prevent pollution; Man's genius is challenged to come up with new and bold solutions.

The most recent innovations already introduce a new component in the geography of water. We will dig deeper for water while trying to prevent drying out the planet's womb. We will better protect the deep water resources than we have until now protected oil reserves.

We increasingly master the extraction of salt from water. Not only for seawater desalination but also for the millions of km² under which the groundwater is brackish. The use of inverse osmosis, the huge size of installations have contributed to considerably lower prices. And they will keep dropping to make the use of this technology accessible to a growing number of countries victim of the "hydric stress".

We will simply have to pay more attention to the future use of significant quantities of all kinds of salts which cannot be discharged in the natural medium without damaging the marine and river ecosystems.

We will transfer water from one region to another, over increasingly large distances. Algeria is undertaking a transfer of water over close to 800 km in the South of the country. China is thinking of a huge works of more than 3000 km in length to overcome the shortages hitting the North of the country.

We will know how to recycle treated water for use in agriculture or leisure activities. « Not one more drop of water to the sea » stated Hassan II, the late King of Morocco. It is still not yet entirely true, but for the near future we can already imagine a kind of new water "short cycle" which will slow down or limit passing through the long cycle and ending up in the sea and then in the skies through evaporation and back on land to recharge the soils with rain and snow.

Whether it is for pumping, desalination, transferring, recycling or recharging, water in all its states will always require more energy. More and more energy and notably those which are renewable will be privileged. And in this field too, there's a lot of progress to be made. This will happen gradually, day after day. Solar, wind geothermal and nuclear energy will be developed with better efficiency and lower costs because there is no doubt that Man will manage to better harness them. And water will be one of the first elements to benefit from that. Undoubtedly, access to water lies on the progresses made in the field of energy. The faith of both is tied and this is why both world councils of

energy and water have decided to establish strong and sustainable work relations.

Several other spectacular innovations resulting from R&D efforts will substantially broaden the scope of technological solutions that can be implemented to allow for a better access to water.

Yes, things are changing and greater will be the pace for as long as we can convince decision makers that the problem is ahead of us in the decades to come. And only the pressure exerted by public opinion relayed by the media and driven by the fear of growing tensions with a view to the shortage of water, can give this issue the importance it deserves as a true planetary challenge.

At this stage, it is easy to understand that the issue of water is simultaneously drifting towards two new fields.

The first is that we are now faced with the problem of access and not of the presence of water: water exists but it is essential that, for the survival of humankind, it be there where and when it is needed.

The second is that the debate will no longer be technological since solutions are multiplying but rather much more of the political order with its different financial, legal, institutional and educative components.

Water like air belongs to the new scarcities and the notion of scarcity is before all an economical notion. Are these new scarcities a lasting phenomenon? Yes, certainly for water and this leads to finding out how we can act on this scarceness and its durability.

The answer obviously lies in what we could call political accessibility and which lies on four factors:

Making financial resources available and not only with increased means that will hoist investments for water at the level of those dedicated to telephony. Entrepreneurs in the field just like local financial savings form an opportunity if water and sanitation public accounts are at the same time independent and transparent and if investing in this sector is profitable and morally acceptable.

Asserting clearly the right for each individual to have access to the resource. The right to water does not boil down to free water; it is the recognition of the precondition that we detailed here above. It is the assertion of a priority thanks to which each and everyone will be entitled to more dignity.

Sharing the governance of water between the right institutional levels.

The State and international organisations, to vote laws and enforce the truly strategic policies. The hydrographic basin level which provides a true coherence for the setting up of infrastructures aimed at protecting and enhancing the resource. The local level where people know better how the resource should be allocated and how to fight against pollution.

Transferring and adapting knowledge to the needs of the poorest countries and regions. R&D programmes can no longer be standardised at the service of a purely economical rational. We still need to invent hardy and less costly solutions, accepting the fact that the future water treatment plant in Bamako will not look like the one in Saragossa.

For these measures, these simple solutions and at the contemporary' world's level to be implemented rapidly, the international community is surely lacking a dialogue tool and an organisation mode. No doubt that in the years to come, the types of development aids will evolve with the emergence of what we can call the countries of the Middle. Obviously, China and India but also Brazil, Morocco, Turkey, the Emirates, Indonesia and others, which are at the same time new international bankers and suppliers of ideas and technical and financial solutions, are making their appearance on this scene.

There is an urgent need for a water diplomacy which would agree on the balance of the great continental water reserves, the mitigation of potential conflicts over several transboundary basins and on the refinancing of the debt of the poorest countries in favour of water and sanitation. On this last point, the dialogue between bilateral and multilateral donors is essential so that the cancellation and reduction of the debt be granted under the condition that preferential reinvestments be made in the field of water.

The cause of water will only make progress through dialogue. And just like there are particle accelerators, this cause needs an "efficiency accelerator" allowing, at long last, for the elaboration of an international hydro-political strategy and the assertion of a true collective responsibility.