

WATER FOR PEACE

EDITORIAL

A recently published study by the international think tank IFPRI (International Food Policy Research Institute) warns that in the year 2050, 52% of the world's population will be living in regions with extremely scarce water supplies and that 45% of global output will come under threat if the use of water resources is not drastically improved. In line with this year's WEF Global Risks Report, political and economic leaders concur that the global water crisis and water scarcity constitute the third biggest risk facing the world.

That transboundary water resources give rise to conflict and violence is nothing new. What is new, however, is Swiss international cooperation's initiative under the banner of "Blue Peace" to use water first and foremost as a means with the potential to promote peace.

One would usually expect development projects in the area of water to entail dig-

ging wells and providing poor populations with access to drinking water. Less usual would be a modern water project which involves uniting personalities from politics and the media in one single network aimed at strengthening political and technical dialogue on water cooperation between countries affected. The SDC's Global Programme Water Initiatives is based on precisely such policy projects: last year it enabled 40 representatives from five Middle Eastern countries to come to Switzerland to discuss solutions to water-related problems and provided them with the opportunity to familiarise themselves with peaceful transboundary water use along the Rhine.

The "Blue Peace" approach combines politics with hands-on technical expertise. The ultimate beneficiaries are the populations threatened by conflict or water scarcity.

Christoph Graf
Deputy Assistant Director General

THE BLUE DIPLOMACY STAKES

Countries that manage together the water resources they share do not make war on one another. That is the conclusion of an Indian think tank, the Strategic Foresight Group (SFG), and it is a view shared by Switzerland, which supports some of its work. Code name: Blue Peace. Two reports have been published recently based on this premise: one devoted to the Middle East, the other to the Nile Basin. A number of the former's recommendations are already taking shape. Within the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the Human Security Division and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) run an initiative jointly: one of the main pillars of the Global Programme Water Initiatives is devoted to "water diplomacy".

The Middle East is one of the regions where there is the most pronounced lack of water. By 2025 the region's renewable freshwater supply will have dropped to below one third of 1970 levels. Moreover, practically all rivers and aquifers straddle two or more different countries – all of which claiming their part. Water could well be a major cause of tensions in the 21st century.

The cost of conflict

It all began with an initial report by the SFG – on a Swiss initiative – on the cost of the conflicts in the Middle East. This small think tank based in Mumbai had aroused interest with two similar analyses: one on India and Pakistan, the other on Sri Lanka. Four countries agreed to support a similar study on the Middle East: Norway, Switzerland, Turkey and Qatar.

Using tables and graphics, the study, which was completed in 2008, illustrates in detail – and probably for the first time ever – the overall cost of the conflicts in economic, military and environmental terms. It weighs up the benefits that true peace would bring to the protagonists, in particular in terms of water resources. A textbook case for "water diplomacy".



Water is a scarce and valuable resource for farmers in the region. Watering crops from a tanker truck near the Balikh River in Syria.

Switzerland then decided – along with Sweden – to fund another study, this time on “Blue Peace” in the Middle East, based on the premise that if water could be a cause for conflict, then it could also be used to avoid it. The report, subtitled “Rethinking Middle East Water”, was published in February 2011, after 18 months of research and discussion. Since then some of its recommendations have been being put into practice.

The threat to populations

The countries of the region did not wait for the report to be published before concluding agreements on water sharing. In the 20th century, a range of bilateral and multilateral agreements were signed concerning transboundary rivers.

The agreements are similar in that they are purely technical – concerning only the sharing of water resources – and that they are largely or completely disregarded. And yet the situation is alarming, warns the Blue Peace study, and is aggravated by the fact that current data are misleading. Indeed the lack of coordination between countries means the data each of them provides are not comparable and cannot be verified. Moreover, the flow rates are expressed in terms of annual averages, whereas seasonal and geographic variations are far more relevant. The River Jordan, for example, almost dries up for half of the year, which cannot be deduced from an annual average.

Agreements based on allocations of water volumes are doomed to fail rapidly, owing to the constant reduction in water resources. This reduction is caused by a combination of factors, including multi-

plication of dams, low irrigation efficiency, substantial losses – up to 60%! – from dilapidated water distribution systems, pollution, population growth – and hence rising consumption – and climate change.

Water stress threatens the lives of millions, in terms of public health but also in terms of the environment and food security, hence its huge potential for triggering regional conflict. Syria, for example, uses 85% of its water for agriculture and depends on neighbouring countries, especially Turkey, for an estimated 65% of its supply.

New approach

The Blue Peace initiative is based on a totally new approach. The report makes ten priority recommendations for the short, medium and long term. The gist of the report is that what the region needs are not (only) agreements between technicians on who gets how many cubic metres, but rather a shared political vision containing measures for saving water, water treatment and distribution channels, etc. To this end, the report suggests setting up a “Cooperation Council for Water Resources in the Middle East”. Initially seven countries and regions were included: Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Israel and Palestine. It quickly emerged that this step was too soon for the last two members. They were subsequently suspended from the project so as to allow progress to be made where it was already possible to do so.

The project takes a novel approach: Switzerland and the SFG foster cooperation through transversal networks, bringing together governmental, academic, technical, civil and media representatives (see

article on page 3). They insist on high-level governmental participation, so as to ensure a valid legal framework and that decisions taken will actually be enforced. The goal is to create a link between security and development.

Switzerland’s commitment

The recommendations include cooperation in terms of data sharing, desalination, supply and demand management, etc. Some aspects are on hold for the time being (collaboration between Israel and Palestine), while others are making headway. Switzerland is attending to two dossiers: first, the creation of the political council, which will constitute the architecture underpinning the whole approach and which has been approved in principle by the governments concerned. Its formation will be facilitated by a high-level panel, funded by Switzerland, composed of around twenty individuals widely respected in the field. “One of the priorities will be to establish norms so as to obtain reliable data that can be exchanged between countries”, says Johan Gély, programme officer with the SDC’s Global Programme Water Initiatives. “This data is key for strategic policy and is therefore highly sensitive”.

Switzerland’s second dossier is more technical and concrete in nature: the integrated management of the River Orontes between Lebanon, Syria and Turkey. The first task, currently under way, consists in strengthening institutions for the collection of data and this is already showing results. The Syrian conflict is hampering progress but “there are still areas where we can work”, explains Johan Gély. “Switzerland has maintained a good network of managers, civil servants and academics in Syria. We continue to work with those who are still there. When we organise meetings abroad, they participate.” In 2014 the programme will include a mapping of the damage done to agriculture and the environment by the conflict, with a view to producing quick results to build confidence and prepare for the future.

Peace diplomacy is not restricted to the Middle East. The SFG has produced a second report with Swiss support, published in February 2013, applying the same working methods to the Nile Basin. Other countries have expressed an interest. Ultimately, these first experiences should lead to a global Blue Peace model which can be applied on a large scale.



The Keban Dam on the Euphrates in Turkey.

THREE QUESTIONS TO...



Peter Maurer

Peter Maurer has been president of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) since July 2012. He

previously worked in the Swiss diplomatic service, where he was state secretary at the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs from 2010 to 2012.

Experts predict that water will be a central cause of conflict in the 21st century. Does the ICRC sense this risk in the field?

The nature and the causes of armed conflicts have become much more diverse and complex over the last few decades. The issue of access to water

could be a triggering factor for conflict in the future.

Since the 1990s, armed conflicts and other situations of violence have increasingly taken place in urban or densely populated areas where local communities are highly dependent on the infrastructure in place. The destruction they cause clearly has disastrous consequences for public health. Both in humanitarian emergencies and protracted conflicts, the question of water is becoming increasingly important.

The ICRC has a Water and Habitat Unit which is responsible for ensuring access to drinking water in crisis zones. What is the importance and what are the difficulties of access to water in comparison with the other protection requirements?

The protection promoted by the ICRC covers all aspects of safeguarding the

dignity and the physical and psychological integrity of the victims of conflict and armed violence. Access to water is a vital element of this protection. In the field, it is almost always possible to find solutions to technical problems. However, security aspects concerning in particular the local population and the employees operating the water facilities often create an obstacle to access to water.

“Water diplomacy” advocates cooperation on the management of this resource among states more as an instrument for promoting peace than as an objective in itself. Your comment on this?

Although water can be a source of tension and an issue of negotiation among states, more than anything else it forms a basis for cooperation and rapprochement between countries that share water resources beyond their borders.

THE ART OF SWIMMING AGAINST THE CURRENT

The Blue Peace initiative has given new impetus to the water issue. It has taken a comprehensive, pragmatic approach, linking technology with politics, to draw up the Blue Peace reports on the Middle East and then the Nile. Switzerland's partner, the Strategic Foresight Group (SFG), is also very well connected and, being an India-based organisation, benefits from that country's anti-colonial history. This is something that appeals to countries in the Middle East, and makes for a productive partnership with neutral Switzerland, which has contributed to the project through its own network. For the Blue Peace process, water is not an objective, it is an “instrument for peace”. More than a catch-phrase, this has become the rallying cry of a movement that has captured the imagination of the countries of the region.

Going with what works

The SDC organised three international workshops in Switzerland, Jordan and Turkey in 2010, another in Turkey in 2013 and a learning mission on the Rhine in the same year. Between 40 and 120 people got involved from technology, government, academic and civil society circles, and later the media. Journalists and edi-

tors from the countries concerned were invited to attend to allow them to take stock of the magnitude of the issue. The aim was to create linkages between these various spheres. “There is a core team of about 30 strategically placed individuals who have taken part in every meeting”, explains Mario Carera, a senior consultant within the Human Security Division of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs who has attended all of the meetings. “That facilitates exchanges, which are all the more interesting since these people carry weight in their respective areas of expertise.” Outside of this core group, the initiative distributes its invitations based on expertise and the topics to be addressed.

In his report, SFG President Sundeep Waslekar acknowledges from the outset that it is unlikely all of the Blue Peace recommendations will be implemented. He also has no qualms about promoting the projects most likely to succeed. At the beginning, the initiative was to include seven Middle Eastern countries and regions (see article on page 1). “In Montreux the tensions between Israel and Palestine were threatening to block the process,” recalls Mario Carera. “We decided to emphasise dialogue with countries in the north of the region (Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan), temporarily side-lining Israel and Pales-

tine. It was arguably regrettable, but that flexibility allowed us to lay down a good working basis in the region. In a traditional international process, that would have been unthinkable.”

A free agent

For this reason, the Blue Peace initiative is keen to remain independent of the many existing structures. “We have representatives at all the meetings on the subject, at the World Bank, the United Nations and the international Water Convention, and we invite them too”, SDC Programme Officer Johan Gély explains, “but the Blue Peace programme doesn't want to be part of the traditional framework, it wants to remain a free agent.” This allows it to incorporate politics, because water is a sensitive matter that touches on national sovereignty. This desire to remain independent and the initiative's unusual working methods have also attracted criticism and entail a certain degree of risk. “We encounter resistance”, Gély admits, “because we link politics with technology in an area that has long been occupied by many actors”.

The first results include wide regional media coverage of the Blue Peace process and Switzerland's involvement. In 2013 the initiative reached a combined audience of 30 million people, and that coverage is set to continue in 2014.

KEY POINTS

1 In the Middle East, many water resources are transboundary. Each country depends on its neighbours to meet its needs. Because reserves and available water flows are constantly diminishing, the management of water can create tensions. Many experts think that the conflicts of the 21st century will centre on water.

2 Agreements between countries on the sharing of river flows concluded to date have become obsolete owing to the constant decrease in these flows. The origins of this water stress are inefficient methods of irrigation, obsolete distribution, deficient treatment of waste water, pollution and population growth.

3 In 2011, Switzerland launched the Blue Peace initiative which is based on the principle that regional coordination with a broader scope than technical agreements can be a useful tool for promoting peace. Water diplomacy requires a truly global political vision of integrated water management. The process was initiated jointly by the Human Security Division of the FDFA and the SDC's Global Programme Water Initiatives.

4 The Blue Peace initiative is based on networks of academic and technical experts as well as on the policies of the countries concerned with the aim of ensuring the implementation of existing agreements. A regional media network has been invited to take part in the process to ensure up-to-date information for the local population and to raise awareness among governments.

5 This process involves the following seven countries and regions in the Middle East: Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Israel and Palestine. Five of these countries are currently conducting discussions within the framework of regional workshops. The first of the planned measures concern the standardisation of data and the exchange of information among countries. This demands a high degree of trust. Such data are considered very sensitive because they touch on the issue of national sovereignty.



The Blue Peace initiative awakens interest. Political leaders of the high-level forum and the FDFA meet, on invitation, at the House of Lords in November 2012.

INNOVATIVE PROJECTS

(under www.sdc.admin.ch/projects)

Better knowledge of groundwater resources

The SDC is committed to reducing tensions that can arise in the context of the management of transboundary aquifers. It encourages the actors concerned to acknowledge that these resources are shared, and it implements confidence-building measures. The hydrological data are compared, and measures are harmonised with the aim of creating a basis of knowledge that permits the water reserves to be managed as a shared resource.

Support for the Water Convention

The SDC supports the implementation of the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes. The Water Convention was adopted in Helsinki in 1992 and provides a coherent legal framework for cooperation on shared water resources. It takes a holistic approach that considers water to be an integral part of ecosystems, human societies and economies. Switzerland ratified the convention in 1995.

Defining the "rules of the game" regarding rivers

The laws and institutions of a country determine the rules of the game of water management. It is important to ensure cooperation among the upstream, downstream and riparian countries of a transboundary river basin. The SDC aims to raise awareness of the advantages of cooperation – through specific examples – and create a consensus on this issue. The longer term aim is to have cooperation mechanisms in place and transboundary agreements signed.

IMPRINT

Editor

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SDC, Directorate Global Cooperation
Freiburgstrasse 130, CH-3003 Berne
info@deza.admin.ch, www.deza.admin.ch

Photos World Bank/Thomas Sennett, World Bank/Yosef Hadar, SFG

This publication is also available in German and French