

Water diplomacy and culture of sustainability | River Niger

by Antonia Massocco

On the 9 June 2022, the Centro Piemontese Studi Africani has held in presence the last but not least appointment of the four year conferences and seminars cycle on water diplomacy and the culture of sustainability.

Now more than ever, water deserves attention given that its depletion is becoming a substantial problem. The scarcity of water is coming mainly from climate change and desertification.

This time the focus of the conference has been on the River Niger and its regime, so we looked at area of the Sahel. We talked about sustainability since we want to envision a rational use of such a scarce resource and we talked about diplomacy since it is necessary to have an appropriate management of a resource which involves several countries and different populations.

The President of the CSA, Renzo Rosso, was present in order to introduce the conference, following a speech by the collaborator of the EU Special Representative in the Sahel, the professor Emanuela del Re, as she could not be present. The conference was moderated by Emanuele Fantini, from the IHE Delft Institute for Water Education. Then, it has been streamed the movie “Marcher sur l’eau” by Aïssa Maïga followed by a debate among experts, respectively Sabrina Bonetto, head of the interdepartmental centre on West Africa studies in UniTo, Federico Perotti, a civil and hydraulic engineer and Andrea De Georgio, a free lance reporter. The conference ended with the vision of two short documentaries from the series Contrecorrent realised by the NGO Engim.

These conferences are part of the third platform of diplomacy since they consist in cultural initiatives which do not involve the government initiatives and which instead rely on experts, universities, media and organisations. The goal is to give new and different representations of these conflicts in order to try to solve them.

Water is crucial for life, it is a basic necessity and indeed it has been deemed by the Council of the European Union a prerequisite for surviving and for human dignity and it is a fundamental basis for resiliency of societies and for the environment.

The theme of water diplomacy is not only important as water is necessary to life, but it is also important from a geopolitical point of view since it addresses so many challenges which are all interlinked. Indeed, when we reason about exploiting water resources and water supply, we must also talk about climate change, governance, access to services, demographic growth and national security. We can appreciate how these issues are interlinked especially in the region of Sahel.

Furthermore, water diplomacy is inherently an overarching theme provided that water is not simply confined to a single nation, but rivers and lakes often cross more than one nation. For this reason, an integrated management of resources becomes relevant, especially at a transboundary level.

We can infer the relevance of water from the fact that the 6th goal by 2030 of United Nation Agenda is to ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. Again, we can appreciate the transversal nature of water as the 6th goal can be linked to other goals such as the one about climate change or the one about hunger.

Note that water diplomacy is not relegated only to Africa, diplomats all over the world are appealing to it. For example, the European Commission has set out the Global Gateway, a new European strategy to boost sustainable and trusted connections in order to strengthen health, education and research systems across the world. This project makes of the European Union a promoter of the integrated management of hydric resources through better infrastructures.

The actions taken by these governative institutions represent the first platform of diplomacy, hence the diplomacy undertaken by the diplomats, by the Ministers.

The scarcity of water, or even its absence, it is often linked to two phenomena, respectively conflicts for the control of the resource and the migration of the so called environmental refugees. Through the vision of the documentary “Marcher sur l’eau”, we can appreciate these two aspects in a very emotional way. This film was released in 2021 and it has been realised by the French-Senegalese Director Aïssa Maïga. It is the story of a small village set in Niger named Tatiste, victim of the climate change, fighting for the access to water. A scene which comes often on the screen is a 14 years old girl walking everyday to the well in order to take water, meaning she is deprived of her schooling time. There are adults leaving the village and the kids temporarily in order to move to places more rich in terms of water, so we can appreciate local migrations. It is a movie about absence: the absence of water which scars the life of the village, but also the absence of parents. Consequently, it is a movie about waiting: kids wait for their parents to come back from their migration and at the same time the whole village waits for the intervention of the government. Indeed, thanks to the help of a teacher, they have managed to send to the government a request for drilling, so they have a closer access to water since the village is lying on an underground lake. From this we understand the title of the documentary: the paradox of how these people who do not have access to water are literally walking above water. Finally, some trucks arrive and the works for the forage can begin, but we do not know how much time it will take to finish the work, how the well will be managed, who actually are those people working and who sent them. In fact, this movie leaves many questions open which is why the CSA has asked experts in different fields to comment on it.

First, we should look at the chain of procedures which leads to the supply of water. We should consider that once we have located an aquifer, the process is still long. Once the well is made it must be maintained, people must be taught on how to do it, it is important to find the appropriate management of water, especially when it is implied for different uses. All these aspects are not showed by the documentary. Also, every aquifer is different; they are not located always at the same depth, the quality and the quantity of water available changes from place to place and also the ways in which water can be extracted in view of its employment. It might also happen that water is not where it was supposed to be according to the design phase; this will affect the forecast of monetary funds needed and the amount of time required to do the works. In addition, the water found could be saline, so it would only speed up the process of desertification if employed. Or, the water found could be not qualitative good meaning that in the long run it would have really bad effects on people’s health.

So, it is important to not base drilling works on past experiences, but to always look at data of that particular site and at its specific issues in order to not waste investments. By following the right practice is easy to avoid this kind of issues. So, it is crucial to know well the territory, the purpose of the employment of water, how many people will draw from this site and then choose the exact strategy to procede which could be to drill as well as to store rainwater or even a combination of different collection and employment systems.

Following this first phase of identifying the right flow rate and the quality of water, the second phase requires that water must be well managed. Nowadays, financing is only allowed if the project includes a second phase involving local actors and providing formation for a sustainable employment of water.

Looking at the reality of financing, in the past decades, investments to provide access to water have been made. So now that access to water is no longer a widespread problem, the investments should be aimed at the second goal of water, hence hygiene and the quality of water. Nowadays half of the worldwide population does not have access to safe services of sanitation.

Often projects are addressed to requalify old forages which no longer work. For this reason it is useful to build a network of mechanical maintenance. In this perspective, water is the most relational element since a drilling site works well when a network of people and knowledge is active which bring us back to the concept of water diplomacy.

Another aspect worth to mention is the demographic pressure. Population is growing fast, especially in the region of Sahel, but water is not increasing with population, instead it is depleting. So, it is necessary that people learn to coordinate and to manage properly the resource in order to make a sustainable and aware use of it both because they use it for different purposes (agriculture, rearing, hygiene) and because different countries are tapping from the same resource. So again local diplomacy is relevant in order to avoid conflicts over the resource.

For what concerns conflicts, we should mention how several actors, more or less directly tied to jihadist groups, try to exploit conflicts over resources, climate change and demographic changes as ethnic conflicts in order to gain control over resources and enroll young militants. These conflicts between herders and farmers used to be managed by local governments, but now they are exploited by jihadist groups who are trying to take control of trade routes. Nowadays, the primary feud controlled by sahelian jihadist is the area in the midst of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. These are not simply geopolitical conflicts, but population experiences them in their day-to-day lives. One example is the semi-nomadic population of herders in Niger, the so-called Peul, who used to cross the River Niger during transhumance doing rituals, but now they do not practice them any longer since they are constantly under attack by the Malian militia. The government has lost its authority in managing these conflicts or it does look the other way. The fact that herders seasonally migrate, it shows how these population had to adapt to the harsh climatic conditions characterizing the Sahel, such as desertification. The idea is basically that nomads population migrate to look for water which is necessary for survival as a famous tuareg saying reads out: “water is life, milk is nourishment, tea is pleasure”.

Now more than ever, climate is even more rigid due to climate change which exerts a strong influence on the life of people. Climate change has become so intrusive for people living in this area; it is well expressed by a scene in the documentary that captures the teacher asking his students to repeat the French word for climate change.

In addition, speaking about security, we should note how the zones where the documentary was shoot are no longer accessible, not even for local reporters. It is always interesting to have testimonies from local people, as the documentary has done. Local testimonies and positive experiences should encourage people’s sensitivity so that they can look deeply into this reality without having a distorted Eurocentric vision.

The delta of the River Niger, one of the largest in the world, has always been a centre of exchange among populations, it has fostered relations. The small islands that surface are cyclically used by Bozo fishers to catch fishes, by Peul herders for their animals and by farmers to cultivate this so fertile land. Unfortunately, nowadays there are forces that are interested in seeing uncertainty in the region of the Sahel; these forces are threatening this more or less pacific management of resources.

The conference ended with the vision of the two short documentaries part of a reportage realised by Andrea de Georgio and other collaborators within the project “GOT - Générer des Opportunités de Travail sur la route Guinée Bissau - Sénégal - Mali” taken forward by the NGO Engim Internazionale and financed by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation. The series is about young people living in Mali who decide to go against the tide, hence they do not want to leave their country to look for a better life somewhere else. They have become aware that they have all the chances to continue to be a dancer and a journalist just where they are. They are aware that if we want to see a better Africa we need to believe in it and especially young people should stay there to make the change possible.

To sum up, thanks to the vision of this documentary and the help of experts we were able to delve into the theme of water. We have seen how vital is water, how it confers dignity to population and how crucial is to develop a diplomacy of water. We have look at the long process which leads to the supply of water and how investments should be rationally allocated. Finally, we analysed the security dimension of water, hence the conflicts which arise sharing a resource.