

COSPE AT COP21 WATER AND AGROECOLOGY TO STOP CLIMATE CHANGE

Water, agriculture and climate: a permanent relation. Within the complex climatic system, the water cycle plays a vital role in maintaining the biospheric equilibrium, the biodiversity of the planet and, not least, the development and the consolidation of human activities, especially in the agricultural sector. Of the totality of existing cultivated lands, more than 80% is dependent on rainfalls and the productivity is highly associated with the a good balance of soil humidity and evaporation. On the other hand, more than 18% of plantations depends on water availability for irrigation. To all this one must add that conventional agriculture, and its goal of (a progressively) increased production, is among the main causes of the pollution of acquifers and the emission of greenhouse gases (both as a consequence of fertilized production and of fuel usage for mechanization, and as an effect of soil usage), as well as one of the sectors with more consumption of water (more than 70%), especially for irrigation.

Such an agricultural production risks to be a key factor and the main victim of a changing climate, of an hydrological system that can't cope with the increased needs of a growing population and with unpredictable and extreme (natural) events that have devastating impacts and consequences. To avoid this outcomes we should question the entire paradigm, favoring a transition from an industrial and productivist approach to an agroecological production that is well embedded in the territories, able to reduce emissions and water consumption while increasing the water retention capacity of soils, allowing for the replenishment of acquifers and, not least, preventing the hydrogeological risk.

According to the 2015 edition of the UN World Water Development, presented in March, water consumption is expected to increase because of the growing magnitude of the world population and of the relative demand of products and services. The projection for 2030 envisages a 40% drop in water availability, unless the management and the usage of such resource is improved in a substantial way.

There is a link between the economic value of a resource and its scarcity: the reduction in water availability doesn't just constitute an environmental and social issue, but it also transforms water from a common good to an economic one which is exchangeable on the market. The commodification process is widely supported by institutional policies, such as the ones promoted by the WTO, and by free trade agreements, like the one between the EU and the USA (TTIP), EU and Canada (CETA) or the Economic Partnership Agreement between the EU and ACP countries.

In this context, phenomena like Water Grabbing have a critical role, although they aren't as fully recognized and discussed like the more known Land Grabbing and notwithstanding their strong impact on communities, on life quality and on biogeochemical cycles.

Water Grabbing: the new frontier of nature alienation

The progressive commodification of water is taking place via practices like Water Grabbing, that present a variety of case records, all characterized by the misappropriation of the water resources, that are transformed from common goods available to everyone to real speculative assets for the benefit of a private or public actor. It is a phenomenon that appears in different forms: from the diversion of the water used for local cultivation in favor of the irrigation of export crops (sugarcane or biofuels); to the usage of water for mining operation (like fracking for shale gas); from the conversion of water management systems into private ones, to damming rivers to have water supplies for dams, to water exploitation for military purposes.

Ghana and Swaziland: two examples of Water Grabbing

Ghana: water for citizens¹

“Still today, 3,5 million people in Ghana don’t have access to drinking water. In rural areas, the lack of access to water reaches 20%. 87% of the population (more than 21 million people) doesn’t have access to adequate water supplies and sanitation services.” These discouraging figures are provided by Ibrahim Musah, policy officer at WaterAid in Ghana. Despite the tireless struggle of the “National campaign against water privatization” and the consequent de-privatization of urban services, the water and health crisis in the Country says it all and the State of Ghana shows how the government considers water as a “national security problem” instead of as a common good to protect. In addition to the inefficiencies of the water and sanitation system and the growing awareness on the need to include the human right to water in the Constitution, Ghana is currently at a cross road: accepting the new conditions imposed by the IMF to the detriment of its sovereignty or, alternatively, adopting a national management plan for its water resources. It is a strategic choice that could encourage a real public management of water, one that is participatory and responsible at the national level and decentralized at the local level, with clear break with respect to the possible privatization process, a de facto Water Grabbing phenomenon imposed by big International institutions.

Swaziland: water for all

In Swaziland the best lands, that are the more easily accessible, closer to water sources or more fertile ones have been assigned to the intensive cultivation of sugarcane. An environmental and social disaster that can be summarized in a number: 385,4. The figure refers to the billion liters of water that have been subtracted in 2014 from the main river basins in Swaziland by the principal companies working in the sector (the Royal Swaziland Sugar Corporation (RSSC) and the Ubombo Sugar Limited (UBS)) in order to irrigate the hectares of canes that they manage directly or indirectly.

COSPE works in the Lubombo region, the Swazi area that borders Mozambique, a part of which is dominated by big sugarcane plantations. The work in the region focuses on the issue of community management of natural resources, of which water access and transition to agroecology are topics that are highly interrelated and substantial. In this scenario, Water Grabbing is related to the unsustainable farming, that leads to water and soil consumption and to a growth of greenhouse gases emissions.

¹ COSPE works in Ghana with the project “Water Citizen: Promoting Participatory Policy Making and Effective Service Delivery on Water and Sanitation”, with the purpose of improving the living conditions of the Nzema population and of the Jomoro district, of strengthening the role of civil society to take part in policy making processes and to encourage the efficiency of water services in the area.

COSPE towards COP21

The 21st UN Conference of Parties on climate could represent a turning point in the urgent (or unavoidable or crucial) fight against climate change. In Paris an organic and globally shared strategy needs to come into being, to apply new rules and new approaches to hinder climate change, starting from 2020. The general tendency is to gradually move from a system of legally and operationally binding reduction goals, to a voluntary system of “pledge and review”, where countries will be called upon to propose plans to cut greenhouse gases emissions that are outside the scope of the mandatory goals and that are decided collectively. This constitutes a radical change with respect to the philosophy that inspired the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol, especially on mitigation.

Such new approach, in the opinion of COSPE, risks to weaken a process that should instead focus on a general rethinking of the economic system through the establishment of clear and binding rules that can't be circumvented.

For these reasons, COSPE believes that, in order for COP21 to be a real milestone in the fight against climate change, the Conference should:

- reach an agreement that provides for legally and operationally binding rules for cutting greenhouse gases emissions;
- make Governments allocate new, certain and adequate resources to ensure adaptation to climate change, based on the “Common But Differentiated Responsibility” and “Equity” concept
- drastically rethink the agricultural model for the future, favoring and sustaining a transition towards an agroecological model;
- decide to eliminate every fossil fuels subsidy, reorienting the resources towards renewable energies;
- rethink the role of water as a resource, whose growing scarcity is decisive for climate change. In this respect, the right to water is a central common good to protect for every person, as well as for every living being on the planet.