

WATER CONFLICTS AND BIO-DIPLOMACY

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Waterfall - no trouble at all

says the haiku poet. However, the fall of water is becoming less and less free, as it becomes more and more regulated by social and economic interests. This gives rise to trouble of all kinds. The benefits for some, like access to electric power and irrigation, constitute a loss for others: riparian populations, fishes, birds, biodiversity, ecological balance.

Conflicts of interest often start at a local level and then escalate into international disputes. In Africa and the Middle East alone, we know of more than 200 water disputes. Very often, governments and large enterprises want to exploit water resources to the detriment of local populations, who claim historic rights to water resources as their source of livelihood. Such conflicts are mostly settled by the buying power of the strongest, often with negative repercussions, not only for river populations, but also for long-term environmental interests.

A problem in this context, which is very prominent in the South Pacific, is that land and water did not have a market value, a price, until colonial powers tried to take control of natural resources. What the colonialists regarded as a "bill of sale," the local chiefs understood as a "rental agreement," since all land and water traditionally belonged to the village and could never be handed over to strangers. This has given rise to many subsequent disputes that have even escalated into political conflicts, like the one in Fiji between the indigenous population and the Indian immigrants.

Water does not follow political boundaries, but political boundaries are often drawn along water lines. The downstream State is dependent on the upstream State, which can use its control of water flow as an instrument of political power. On the other hand, we also know of cases where a downstream State may refuse to accept benefits offered by an upstream State, because of feelings of inferiority and dependence. The current water conflicts in the Middle East are mainly caused by factors other than supply and demand, including political rhetoric, religious beliefs, historical claims, or unrealistic national plans.

When the Norwegian government became involved in the peace process in the Middle East, the Norwegian mediators soon realised that a major obstacle to the peace process was lack of information and data about the region's water resources. No plan for the sharing of resources could be made without reliable information, which led the Norwegians to produce *The Water Atlas*, a scientific report on all available water resources in the region. This report contributed to the development of an atmosphere of trust and credibility between parties, which paved the way for the first regional water agreement in the Middle East.

The Norwegian experience shows that a successful political settlement must be based on "two-track" diplomacy, meaning active co-operation between scientists, academics, and diplomats. The role of the scientist and the academic is to establish a factual basis in order to get away from rhetorical fantasies and mutual mistrust. The role of the diplomat is to translate scientific facts into a negotiation process, in order to create a common understanding of collective concerns.

A third track is needed to implement the negotiated settlement on a practical level: political willpower. The role of the politician is to exercise political willpower required to shape public opinion and to persuade legislative and financial authorities to provide the necessary instruments for the realisation of the project.

Last, but not least, comes public opinion. Universities and international organisations play an important role in making the general public aware of existing problems and in mobilising support for change. Many years ago, at a young diplomats meeting in London, the leader of the Liberal party, Mr. Joe Grimond, had said: "When I started in politics, I thought that I had to repeat a message seven times, in order to get it across. Now I know I have to repeat it seventy-seven times!"

What is the difference between diplomacy and bio-diplomacy? It is basically a difference in perspective. Bio-diplomacy looks at a problem from a universal life-force standpoint, identifies the unifying essence of the issue - much as a scientist would - and brings this essence to the surface, to be acknowledged as a common ground for building a harmonious future. If we can identify the unifying essence of a problem in time, we can prevent the problem from turning into a conflict. Sweden, as a candidate for the United Nations Security Council, advocated conflict prevention as a main task for the Council. On the basis of this programme, Sweden was elected to the 1997-1998 Council, and is doing its best to apply this perspective globally.

"Mountains and rivers are good neighbours," says a proverb. Coexistence means interdependence. Peaceful coexistence has not been able to last, because, being based on adversity, it failed to realise that all existence should be based on harmonious interactions. This is the essence of bios.

Ambassador Kai Falkman has served successively as Attach? at the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Attach? in Tokyo, Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, First Secretary in London, Counsellor in Lisbon and Ambassador in Luanda. He has also worked with Special Duties at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and has been engaged in studies at the CFIA at Harvard University. Ambassador Falkman holds a Law degree and, from 1991 to 1995 was the General Consul of Sweden in Istanbul.