

AFRICA'S WATER CRISIS NEEDS INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

Stan Chu Ilo

The African continent faces many challenges as it tries to catch up with the pace of international development. It is significant that the Church in Africa plays a vital role in addressing the challenges facing the continent today. This is particularly true of the Catholic Church in Africa which has been in the forefront in the democratic efforts in countries like Congo-Kinshasa, in election monitoring in Nigeria and Ghana and in the constitutional process in Benin, Kenya and worn torn Liberia and Sierra Leone. However, besides planting the seed of the Christian faith, it is in the area of human development and capacity building that the Church has been most visible. Education is the key to national development and also fundamental to the realization of other rights which conduces to general wellbeing of people. An educated populace is the greatest weapon in the fight against poverty, cultural assumptions and practices which often marginalize women and children and from superstitious beliefs and activities. The Catholic Church has been the greatest pioneer in the educational enterprise in countries like Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Rwanda, Cameroon, and Zimbabwe among others. With the growing number of men and women religious and priests; and the exponential growth in the number of religious communities, there has been an amazing growth in the number of educational institutions being established and run by the Catholic Church in Africa. Church schools at all levels have been instrumental in equipping young people with the requisite knowledge so that they can rise to the golden heights of hard work, political participation, ethical consciousness and faith based witnessing and initiatives. However, the countries of Africa still face a lot of challenges in terms of poverty, institutional collapse, and absence of basic social infrastructure, poor healthcare, political instability, civil strife, war and violence. These problems though unevenly felt in Africa still pose serious challenges to the general wellbeing of Africans and sometimes threaten the developmental goals like education, human rights, affirmative action for women and children being supported by countries like Canada (through CIDA) and other international organizations in United States and Europe.

One recurring problem in Africa today is the lack of clean and affordable water. Many Canadian Catholics would be making financial contributions in churches in support of the Development and Peace Share Lent Campaign. It is necessary that they realize how much their contributions go in changing the lives of many people around the world. Among all the developing continents of the world, Africa receives the greatest amount of grant from the Development and Peace Canada for many human development concerns. Indeed, CIDA which often supports groups like the Development and Peace has committed 500 million Canadian dollars under its New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) launched in 2002. This initiative places Africa's development

in the hands of Africans. Indeed, the idea of giving hand-outs to African countries to respond to crises of political, environmental, economic or health kind does not help Africans develop the capacity to maintain their structures and organize their social, economic and political lives in a consistent and sustainable manner. This new Canadian initiative is one that recognizes the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. Africa demands some assistance on one hand. However, on the other hand, Africans should not abandon their fate to Western donor agencies. The governments in Africa and religious institutions ought to re-engineer the African society and steer the people on the path to self-autonomy and healthy growth. Most Africans do recognize that Africa has a lot of primary energies in terms of her under-developed human capital, untapped material resources, rich cultural heritage and a flowering creative genius in arts, science and technology. There are also the wonderful natural resources which remain largely unexplored and unused. Indeed, the emerging world order would be enriched and the pressure on immigration and refugee agencies by desperate Africans reduced if Africa is supported to reclaim her future.

Unfortunately, sometimes the problems of Africa like water scarcity, civil unrest etc have become a source of cheap business for Western companies. The Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace, in its 2003 address to the Third Water Forum in Kyoto Japan notes that water by its very nature cannot be treated as a mere commodity among other commodities. Water is a major factor in each of the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social and environment. In November 26th 2002, the UN Economic and Social Commission affirmed that: "the human right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic uses". Article 19 of the UN Millennium Declaration states the commitment of the international community to halving the number of people without safe drinking water by 2015. Water is an economic good and vulnerable and a finite resource essential to sustain life, development and the environment. Indeed, water is essential to realizing other key elements of development in the social, economic and political domain. Water then could be said to be essential to life.

Catholic social thought has always stressed that the defense and preservation of certain common goods, such as the natural and human environments, cannot be safeguarded simply by market forces, since they touch on fundamental human needs which escape market logic (cf. *Centesimus Annus*, 40). Many people living in poverty, particularly in the developing countries, daily face enormous hardship because water supplies are neither sufficient nor safe. Women bear a disproportionate burden in this regard. In many African countries most women spend a lot of time fetching water to provide for their husbands and children. For water users living in extreme poverty this is rapidly becoming an issue of life and death. As Luc Coppejans, the Executive Secretary of Africa-Europe Faith and Justice Network (AEFJN) had argued, the water crisis in Africa is the worst in the whole world and calls for some kind of compassionate

effort to address it instead of the present exploitation of the crisis for economic gains by some Western companies. For instance the French service provider groups Vivendi-Environnement, SAUR and SUEZ-ONDEO, which hold together 74% of the world water market in Africa, have in recent years been contracted (some for concessions up to 25 years) for water and sanitation services in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Chad, Mozambique, Niger, Morocco, Cameroon, Gabon, South Africa, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Kenya. The fact that water and sanitation in Africa are badly needed products and offer a fast growing market with a good elite clientele makes water and sanitation a sure source of wealth for some Western companies.

The problem of water scarcity in Africa was graphically presented by the former Nigerian Minister for Water Resources, Muktari Shagari when he said at the informal meeting of African ministers for Water resources that: "The highest price for water scarcity in Africa is often paid by the poor majority of people in terms of money to buy small quantities of water, calories expended to fetch water from distant sources, impaired health, diminished livelihoods and even lost lives." Any person who has ever lived or visited the African continent would agree with this statement. According to the UN Water Development Report for last year, Africa faces a water crisis. 250 million Africans representing 21% of the population have no access to clean water. With only 64% of the population having access to improved water supply, Africa has the lowest proportional coverage of any region of the world. The situation is much worse in rural areas, where coverage is only 50% compared with 86% in urban areas. Yet more than half of the urban dwellers have inadequate provision. Giving the fact that about 300 million Africans live below the poverty level, living on less than 1dollar a day, one can imagine the degree of poverty and suffering that many Africans face with this water crisis. About one third of African countries especially in the Horns of Africa, the West African fringes of the Sahara Desert and those in the Atlantic coast also face some ecological disasters that worsen their water situation. In Ethiopia and Eritrea the decreasing water level of Lake Alemeya and other rivers have led to drought with resulting hunger and starvation especially of the most vulnerable members of society. Many dams and water catchments in these regions have become sandy basins. There are more than 10 countries in Africa that face the threat of draught and famine in the Horn of Africa and surrounding regions.

The government of Tanzania made news in 2002 when it claimed that 70% of the population in its capital city of Dar es Salaam has clean water; this statistics appeared overly exaggerated given the scarcity of water in Tanzania. In Kenya, the price of a liter of water is higher than the price of a liter of petrol. This is similar to the situation in Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Chad and Cameroon where there is severe water scarcity owing to corruption and official apathy and in some cases worsened by adverse encroachment of the Sahara on arable land, which diminish the water levels and endanger the ecosystem. In the North African Maghreb region where it is believed that irrigation originated, the water problem has led countries like Algeria to be meet with only half of its water

needs, making water hawking a flourishing business for the massive sea of the unemployed youth. Water hawking is a kind of unhelpful ways of survival for many jobless young people in Northern Nigeria and Cameroon. Both droughts and floods have increased in frequency and severity over the past 30 years. Over the past ten years, Africa has experienced nearly one-third of all water-related disaster events that have occurred worldwide, with nearly 135 million people affected, 80% by droughts. In 2000, large floods hit southern Africa, leaving 850,000 people homeless, and almost 1,000 dead victims. Drought and cyclone have constantly ravaged Madagascar and destroyed her source of water. Runoff and water availability are expected to decline in the northern and southern regions of the continent while the frequency of floods and droughts will increase. As a result, 25 African countries are expected to experience water scarcity or water stress over the next 20–30 years. Due to recurring droughts and chronic water shortages in many areas, majority of African countries and people pay a high price for water.

Many water borne diseases are home to Africa and are perhaps the greatest causes of sickness and death. Contaminated water cause gastro-intestinal illness like diarrhea and the deadly typhoid fever. Vector borne diseases cause bilharzias and malaria which is the highest cause of death in Africa, especially in the sub-Saharan region. According to the World Health Organization, Africa counts for 85.7% of the 1.1 million deaths caused by malaria world wide annually, most of those who die from Malaria are children under five whose immunity is usually low. There are many countries in Africa in which whole villages have been wiped out due to cholera outbreak which is water-borne. Guinea worm disease and filariasis (river blindness) are destroying the sight and lives of many people in Africa and ravaging many countries in sub-Saharan Africa whose only source of water are stagnant ponds and streams. When one realizes the poor health care system worsened by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the grim situation and condition in Africa can be seen in its harsh reality.

With two third of world's debt owed by African countries and with Africa just producing 5% of income of the developing world, it is heart-wrenching when one thinks of how Africans could rise to this challenge of water and sanitation crisis. As a Nigerian who has been exposed to Western life both in Europe and North America, I cannot but wonder when Africa would rise from the shadows into the broad day light of integrated development. Most Africans believe that Africans should put on the shoes of the long distance runners to make a break through. They however hope that there would be some concrete acts of solidarity and genuine concern shown by Western countries to kick start Africa's long walk to sustainable development. In this regard, Canada has always been a dear friend of Africa and the Catholic Church in Canada has always been the torch bearer in this hand shake across the Atlantic.

