

Translation into English

Interview, Entrevista, 28 May 2010

Ania Grobicki, Executive Secretary of the Global Water Partnership

"Together we can learn to better use the water"

While in certain regions of the planet, water is wasted and polluted, in others there are people who still lack access to running water or proper sanitation. Ania Grobicki, specialist in water management, emphasizes it is key to act in an integrated manner in order to care for this life's vital resource.

BY LAURA GARCÍA OVIEDO (MUY INTERESANTE) ¹

Ania Grobicki is Executive Secretary of the Global Water Partnership, an intergovernmental international network that brings together several organizations seeking to improve water management.

This network was founded in 1996 by the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation, and is currently composed of about 80 organizations worldwide. Grobicki, who is chemical engineer, Ph.D. in biotechnology and has also studied economics, was interviewed by MUY INTERESANTE [1] at Bonn, Germany, during a recent meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Native from South Africa, Grobicki has devoted most of her life to study, among other issues, water quality, the pollution problem and ways of recycling.

"To have access to potable water means people should have enough clean water for drinking and for activities related to hygiene, agriculture and energy. Of course, it also implies 'healthy' rivers and lakes, which are very important to keep healthy ecosystems. And it also means to be prepared for and be able to respond to the negative impacts on water, including floods, droughts, rising of sea levels and the consequent salinization of water resources" said Grobicki.

Does it mean climate change adaptation?

- Yes, we observe that taking into account the water cycle is essential for climate change adaptation measures. As the planet warms, the water cycle is accelerating. The global models for climate circulation indicate that extreme weather events such as floods and droughts will be more frequent and intense. We still don't know in detail how climate change is affecting every country, but

we do know that it is altering hydrological measures observed in the last 100 years.

What is the situation in the world today regarding water access?

"The Millennium Development Goals set in 2000 include the goal to reduce, by at least 50 percent, the number of people without access to water and drinking water supplies. Even if that goal is reached by 2015, some people will still not have access to them. The real problem is that some people do not even have sanitation services, and with this I mean that there are many people who do not even have a W.C., or if they do, sewage waters lack a special treatment and therefore pollute drinking water supplies."

And what impact brings this reality?

"It's not only a problem of water quality, in terms of safe water to drink, to use, to irrigate crops, but it is also a question of quantity. Both aspects, quality and quantity, are being affected by climate change. Thus, there is much concern in several countries. We believe that we must work on adaptation plans as part of development processes, but not to take it separately (in an isolated way)."

Is water being recycled in the world for mass consumption?

"There are many countries that recycle water at a large scale. Examples include Namibia, Israel and Singapore. The water is treated to be able to be used in irrigation or even for drinking. There are many chemical and biological treatments, and soil can be used as a filter for organic particles. When industrial wastewater is mixed with domestic sewage, the issue is more complex because there are substances that are very difficult to treat. Therefore, a regulatory system is recommended that prohibits industrial wastewater discharge in inappropriate places, while promoting their separate treatment."

So, is it essential to separately recycle domestic wastewater from industry ones?

"Yes, because domestic wastewater can be used for irrigation in agriculture as they have many nutrients. That is already being done in countries like Mexico and Algeria.

The World Health Organization has guidelines for treating water for safety use. So people are already looking for new ways to take the maximum advantage of water use. Nevertheless, in some countries, the industry is developing the concept of "zero wastewater discharge". In fact, there are factories that already do not produce waste water because they recycle it all."

It has long been said that in the future there will be a 'water war', what do you think about this?

"There's plenty of evidence that people clearly understand that water is essential for life and if we are deprived of this resource, our existence on this planet will be endangered. Currently, we are observing that cooperation in the field of water can be stronger than the tendency to conflict. For example, in the last 40 years, there were three wars between India and Pakistan, but the commitment to respect their agreement on transboundary waters remained intact. It is a strong example of what cooperation can be in this field. I have high hopes that enough people understand the importance of working in a collaborative and participatory way, to have dialogue and share the benefits of water."

We live in a unique planet, where there is water in abundance, but we do not care for it.

"We're incredibly lucky, but in fact, the proportion of fresh water is very low. Approximately 96 percent of the world's water is salty ocean water, and less than 2 percent is freshwater. Of the latter, two thirds are contained in ice layers in the North and South Poles, and also in the mountains. The remainder is a large proportion of groundwater. The fresh water available on surface water bodies like rivers and lakes, is less than 1 percent. Therefore, it is a precious resource and today we are not only wasting, but also polluting what is left. We should learn to improve our water use and this is something we can accomplish together.

A PRECIOUS AND CONTAMINATED RESOURCE

"The fresh water on the surface water bodies like rivers and lakes, is less than 1 percent. Therefore, it is a precious resource that today we are not only wasting, but also polluting what is left," says Ania Grobicki. In the background, a stream of Manila, Philippines, full of household wastes.

ON THE TOP TEN

The Ganges, the main sacred river in India, is one of the top ten most polluted rivers in the world.

Risks and actions

GLACIERS, SALINIZATION AND MINING

Climate change and human action imply several impacts in the world, and water is the main character in this scenario.

The global temperature increase affects the melting of continental ice and mountain glaciers. The Andean countries, including Argentina, Peru, Chile and Ecuador, are part of the list where the problem is evident. Ania Grobicki said that while in the short term the flow of rivers might increase, "the major problem is that once the glaciers are melted completely, the water source will no longer exist and we will only depend on rainfall". Another phenomenon that threatens the natural fresh water reservoirs is the sea level rising, which not only threatens coastal locations where people live, but is also salinizing freshwater reservoirs near the coasts. "The sea water enters as an intruder into freshwater aquifers and damages them with its salinization. There are many organisations already working in this field, observing what happens in places near the coast", says Grobicki.

"It is therefore important a long-term planning that has to do with climate change adaptation", she adds. In this framework, the human activity is added, in which certain economical factors play its role. A concrete example is mining. At the interviewer's (MUY INTERESANTE) inquiry about global debate on water use and the risk of contamination, Grobicki replied: "I'm from South Africa, so I'm familiar with that problem. In my country there is a lot of mining activity: all mines are under heavy regulation and should have environmental management plans. One of the risks is that the mines being used can drain substances that can contaminate water resources. This is somthign that must be discussed and we must work to solve it. It's just one example of how different sectors must come together to solve a problem".

Quality and quantity are being affected by the **Climate Change**

[1] MUY INTERESANTE: monthly magazine on general culture and popular science, widely available in Spanish speaking countries.