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Workshop 4: Is water really „blue gold“?

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Is water really 'blue gold'? There seems to be a very simple answer to this question: Water is the basis of life on our planet. Without it we cannot exist. Gold on the other hand is not essential. Its value is exclusively economic whereas water has a true value, it keeps us alive. From this point of view comparing gold and water is indeed pointless.

Nevertheless, we can not deny that in certain cases water adopts characteristics of gold. In Switzerland, for example, we have the concept of 'Wasserzins'. This is when communities or cantons allocate a certain amount of water to a power station and charge money for it; the 'Wasserzins'. This is usually an important source of income for these communities, in the same way a gold mine could be.

Whenever there is a shortage, water gains a true economic value and can lead to conflicts.

Values of Water

The value of water is very difficult or even impossible to measure. It does not have only one but rather a set of values which can vary significantly depending on the situation. It can have a life-sustaining value, an economic value, a religious value, an aesthetic value, an environmental value and many more. People often disagree about the importance of each of these values.

Water may be an economic good but it is not a market good as long as people don't agree on what monetary value water has. Unfortunately the situation is such that we don't know how to measure the specific values. Water itself has no value; it's the intended use of it that makes it valuable.

What's more, talking about value can be somewhat misleading. Water does not only have a value, but also an overall worth. We must not only consider water as a resource but also the value and worth of bodies of water such as rivers, lakes, glaciers, etc. People need to look at water as a whole.



Responsibilities

The discussion about the value of water soon leads to other questions: Who has a right to water? Who should decide how it is allocated?

Mankind has the ability to influence water not on a macroscopic or microscopic level, but only on a mesoscopic scale - although the boundaries are being pushed further every year. Logically that is also the range at which we can make decisions and at which we have to assume responsibility. Decisions concerning water cannot be made by a private institution but need to be made by the government which should ideally act in the best interest of the people. Water is a public good that can be allocated for private uses but in no case should water ever be owned.

Water related problems vary greatly from one place to another; therefore it seems only natural that decisions need to be made at the lowest possible level of government in a dialogue between different stakeholders.

Governance and Water

There has never been any real war because of water and there should never be one, because there is no lack of water on our planet. It is bad governance that leads to the numerous problems we have seen. If we compare the situation in Africa and Asia, we must come to the conclusion that the problem is mainly a socio-cultural one. A sense of common responsibility is much more present in Asian communities than in African ones and the latter are indeed facing many more problems. But the lines are blurring: capitalism seems to have led to a rapid depreciation of rules around the globe. Individuals, sometimes represented by companies, fill their pockets whenever and wherever they can with no respect to the ethical values which used to hold communities together for centuries.

Obviously the free market is not the right solution. Governments need to make rules and regulate the market where necessary to keep this 'looting' under control, especially when it concerns a resource so important for our daily lives like water.

What people need is not only access to water today, but also secure access to water in the world of tomorrow. That is the problem that we need to solve at the regional and global level.