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Young peoples' involvement in global water issues

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Abstract

The world faces severe and growing challenges in maintaining water quality and meeting the rapidly growing demand for water resources. As the present young people will be playing central roles in the future, the importance of understanding their views and paving ways for their participation is of utmost importance. The involvement of young people in the ‘think globally, act locally’ vision is illustrated here with the case of an international youth movement, the Young Water Action Team (YWAT¹).

Key Words

Youth • Water • global movement • Young Water Action Team

¹ The Young Water Action Team (YWAT) is a global movement of students and young water professionals aged 18 –30 years, who aim to increase awareness, commitment and participation among young people in water related issues. Prior to September 2002, the Young Water Action Team was known as Youth Water Action Team.

Introduction

Solving environmental problems encompasses a number of stages, starting with scientific assessment and risk analysis, followed by public education and the required political action [1]. Scientific study of the problem seldom presents major obstacles compared to public education and political action involved. This becomes even more critical and complicated when it involves multiple stakeholders and least of all water, the key necessity to life.

The world faces severe and growing challenges in maintaining water quality and meeting the rapidly growing demand for water resources. Accordingly, policy makers involved in planning water resources development, allocation, and management have to make decisions with the participation and understanding of the potential impacts on the rest of the users. In the face of such circumstances, we believe that the youth have a role to play, specifically in raising awareness within the general public; in closing in the gap between decision makers and the general public; and ultimately putting their views towards decision-making. For the most part, young people have been left out of the decision-making processes surrounding water accessibility [2]. Within this line of thought, an eloquently put article by Van der Helm [3] entitled “Will Young People Solve the Water Problems?” caught our attention. The author’s observations in the particular challenges facing young people and their involvement in the establishment of a Non-Governmental Organisation, namely, the Young Water Action Team (YWAT), encouraged us to address some of the concerns put forward by Mr. Van der Helm. At the same time we will try to share some of the experiences of YWAT with regard to the involvement and work of young people in the perspective of global water future.

In particular, we will draw close attention to the name YWAT and subsequently demonstrate through its engagements, that any apocalyptic situation, such as that of water's, can stimulate young minds with fresh perspective to come up with visions that can lead to actions.

Part I. Why and what does YWAT involve?

Young: and looking beyond the present

In *Our Common Future* [4] Brundtland, defines sustainable development as the “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the **future generations** to meet their own needs”. Since the young represent the next generation in all aspects of life, including decision-making, their involvement in environmental issues plays a crucial role: they are the next generation – the future, and therefore, they are keen to guarantee sustainability: their own survival. For this specific reason, efforts put into reaching sustainability by the young tend to be genuine.

As young people will be playing central roles in the future, the importance of understanding what kind of images of the future they hold is important. Hicks [5] reported that young people were worried about war, pollution, and poverty, and that in general have a pessimistic image about the future and are concerned about global issues. In the same context, Eckersley [6] considers these findings as a serious warning to present society and its future, reasoning that this pessimism will influence young people's attitude towards their future. However, what has also been observed in young

people is the dominant realism in the present [7]. We believe that this realism in the present is the driving force in determining the orientation of the images of future among the young.

Water: and its image among young people

It is important to identify and understand the image that these young people have constructed on the future of water, since it is these same images of the future that will lead to specific actions or inactions in the present, and accordingly create certain aspects of the future [8].

Water covers about two thirds of the Earth's surface, admittedly. Of this, 97.5 % is held by the oceans and is salty. Of the remaining 2.5 %, the overwhelming majority is locked up in ice caps and glaciers, or unavailable ground water, thus leaving only an estimated 0.08 % as accessible fresh water, on which humans and most other species depend [9]. Moreover, this water is not evenly available, be that in quantity or quality when and where it is needed. But as most leading experts in water agree, the most critical issue now is the mismanagement of existing water resources rather than its availability.

Demand for freshwater is increasing as a result of increasing population, urbanisation, industrial development, agricultural demand and rising life standards; yet the existing water supply is shrinking due to unsustainable ground water mining and pollution. The situation also leaves a threat in the uncharted-waters of the imminent threat of global climate change.

Today, 31 countries, accounting for under 8% of the world population, face chronic freshwater shortages. However, by the year 2025, this is expected to rise to 48 countries encompassing 35% of the world's projected population [10]. To add to this grim picture, 'water wars' have been considered likely to threaten world peace in the near future.

Yet, as the World Water Assessment Programme report [9] says, we know most (though not all) of what the problems are and a good deal about where they are. There is knowledge and expertise available to begin to tackle them. Excellent concepts, such as equity and sustainability have been developed as indicators. Yet inertia at leadership level, and a world population not fully aware of the scale of the problem (and in many cases not sufficiently empowered to do much about it) means failure to take the needed timely corrective actions and put the concepts to work. Accordingly better management of water will enable us to deal with the growing per capita scarcity of water in many parts of the world. This is where the youth can play a role – working on the awareness and aiming for a push to the leadership level. A fully aware and empowered youth will indeed take perspective of these critical water issues and carry on the mission for a sustainable water future.

The variation of water supply in different regions means that different problems are posed at different locations of the world. Hence, the idea behind a global network or for that matter movement of youth tackling different topics at local levels, while aiming for a global voice on sustainable water future.

Action Team: networking-in-action with world youth

After twenty months of its establishment in the First Youth World Water Forum (Vlissingen, The Netherlands, June 2001), YWAT has been setting its corporate image, developing its global strategy and attempting to raise awareness of water issues among young people and also get the voice of the youth and try to act as a bridge makers at both local and international levels [11,12]. Unanimous voice of the youth is one of the most important notions in YWAT: conceptual unanimity in that there is a need in raising awareness among the youth and the young in issues related to water; and unanimity in advocating the belief that “water is everybody’s business.” YWAT’s strategy involves the establishment of regional–local teams, conducting of regional workshops, and networking youth under the umbrella of a global movement represented by Central YWAT. The importance of regional–local units, independent in action but unified in vision with Central YWAT, is a direct result of the “maturity” and awareness of the young that all solutions are not global. Moreover, the young recognise the diversity of people and the cultural differences and sensitivities that lead to a variety of perceptions; thus specific solutions to a community should be the direct result of that community’s efforts.

At the time of publication of this article, YWAT individual members, growing day by day, covered more than 33 countries and 80 members. YWAT members represented both males and females in more or less equal proportions. The backgrounds and involvement of the youth range from the scientific-based to the grass roots social workers and from both government and non-governmental organizations. Moreover, as acceptance to YWAT membership requires submission of a local youth-led-initiatives, a vast array of those have come under YWAT banner to create a global movement. Currently, a number of local YWAT units have been established and some are in

progress, namely North American YWAT (based in USA), Mexico, Middle East and North Africa (based in Egypt), Central African (based in Cameroon), South African, Netherlands, France, India, Pakistan, South Asia (based in Bangladesh), China, Japan.

The YWAT is led through a compact virtual steering committee called the Central YWAT, which is a collection of active participant members of YWAT, who have proven their abilities in both the virtual and practical environment. The central team currently numbers at 17 members and comprises of four taskforces: one which facilitates relationship between all central and local YWAT members (communication taskforce); one which conducts or assists local teams to conduct both virtual and regional conferences (workshops and conferences taskforce); the knowledge and research taskforce aims at gathering and production water educational materials for both members and the public water; and youth-led initiatives taskforce, which aims at creation of alliances and experience-sharing between initiatives. The central team is supported by a full-time secretariat and an advisory board composed of leading experts in water issues.

Part II. Brief overview of activities and challenges: from awareness to participation and commitment.

To involve and empower a group of volunteers, who live in different parts of the world, was not an easy process. Moreover, the process of learning by doing was a norm on the whole concept of the YWAT movement.

The essence of the concept of the YWAT movement is the network of youth-led water initiatives. YWAT operational strategy thus mainly focused on the creation of alliances and coalitions between youth-led initiatives. The central YWAT is effectively a nodal point whereby the voice of the youth is channelled. Although the central YWAT provides local units and individuals to operate according to their local needs, the overall organization provides a credible front to the voice and activities of the youth. Some of the activities, conducted by the local teams include: city walks, clean drinking water projects, school competitions, water and culture collections, newsletters etc. Individuals may also be granted membership, as long as they come up with in any local awareness or participation project(s). YWAT emphasises local activities, as this is a way to put vision into action and expand the youth movement. The biggest challenge of this approach had been making YWAT attractive enough for new and existing members. In addition to being charismatic movement, the network had to generate benefits for young people, help in knowledge and information exchange, and create contacts both between the young people and important decision makers.

According to level of activities, local teams may rise up to form a country or regional YWAT teams, which in due course get recognised as full-fledged YWAT subunits and attain the privilege to use the YWAT suffix: e.g. MYWAT (Mexican YWAT).

The central team in the past has focused on conducting broad based awareness workshops. In 2003, as a preparation for the third world water forum, three major regional workshops were conducted in Egypt, Mexico and China. In addition to raising awareness, youth attitude and feedback towards selected (but not limited to) main issues in water, namely: water as a human right, water governance and civil society, public and

private sector administration of water and water and sustainability were collected. These same topics were once more discussed by the international youth participants of the third world water forum in Kyoto and accordingly, recommendations and comments were made. At the end of the session, all comments were incorporated and after discussion a Young People's Declaration was made and presented at the Ministerial Dialogue held on 21st of March 2003. In addition, as a further recognition, YWAT made up about 10% of delegates invited for an open dialogue with ministers from all over the world. Since then, this declaration has also been submitted to the scientific community through appropriate journals [13].

In general, apart from being costly, these workshops have led to a modest appreciation of issues faced in different parts of the world and more importantly in the establishment of local teams. This definitely helps in spreading future costs involved while creating strategic partners. Moreover, these local teams focus on doable activities while mobilizing the local youth in raising awareness and participation of water issues.

Although, YWAT promotes discussion on local premises occasionally, especially between members of a local team, reliance on electronic communication is the sole affordable means available to the general YWAT community. The official YWAT website <http://www.ywat.org> is aimed at offering a discussion platform and many links to other water issues. Currently, it promotes water related news items and calls for collaboration. In addition it features a database of local youth-led initiatives on water issues. In the future, there are plans that the website may also develop into a supply-and-demand database for students, graduates and employers. The weak points of the website are that although there is awareness and willingness to enrol in YWAT activities,

technological barriers have limited its popularity, especially in less developed countries. Moreover, like all virtual communications, it presents a challenge to maintain active discussion over a longer duration of time.

To promote its international profile, YWAT is continuously cultivating relationships with major global bodies like UNESCO, World Water Council, and Global Water Partnership.

Conclusion

During its short existence, YWAT has set up a corporate image and established a network of youth keen on carrying out activities for a sustainable future. YWAT also has overcome challenges of centralization, by adopting an open, flexible approach. Moreover, it has established itself as a keen representative of the youth in water issues, towards the global and local decision making communities, while keeping its feet still at grass-root activities. YWAT emphasises that awareness should lead to action and should be continuously supplemented with knowledge. YWAT still faces challenges, in educating and gaining experience for its members, mainly the central team, which has grown up with the organizations brief history.

A deeply convinced membership, who works on volunteer basis to achieve sustainable water future, sheds hope that indeed, the youth is a strong unit capable of playing a significant role to solving the world's water problems.

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Brief Vitae

Yoseph Negusse Araya is an Eritrean citizen, and present Secretary of the board of the Young Water Action team. Yoseph is an ecologist currently pursuing a PhD in eco-hydrology. Vahakn Kabakian, is from Lebanon and currently working as a research assistant at the American University of Beirut. Both authors are founding members of the Young Water Action team, and have been actively involved and represented the youth on major water conferences in the past two years.