

WATER: A PRECIOUS COMMODITY

Water is rapidly becoming a precious commodity. Some 200 scientists in 50 countries have ranked water shortages as the most worrying environmental problem for the new millennium. Only about 2.5 percent of the water that covers the earth is fresh water, and much of that is locked in the polar ice caps or deep underground. Less than one percent of the world's freshwater is therefore available for human use. Water is however amongst the most precious of our commodities - vital for sustaining human life on a number of fronts.

Shortages or surpluses of water can lead to droughts or floods. Many countries also suffer from the effect of desertification as their rivers dry up, putting increased pressure on their agricultural production elsewhere. As global temperatures rise, development fuels the demand for water, and pollution continues to damage available sources, competition for water has become increasingly fierce, especially in the developing world.

FOUR OUT OF EVERY TEN PEOPLE IN THE WORLD LIVE IN AREAS WHERE WATER IS SCARCE

The Maasai people are a tribe indigenous to southern Kenya and northern Tanzania. Traditionally the Maasai are nomadic cattle herders, a practice which is also central to the Maasai economy. These practices are however increasingly under threat from droughts that have destroyed traditional grazing lands, forcing many members of the Maasai community away from their ancestral lands and traditions.

The Enclave of Cabinda is a small territory in west central Africa with a population of about 300,000. Much of Cabinda is covered by rainforest, and the local population lives from subsistence agriculture and hunting or fishing. A growing oil industry has however dramatically increased levels of pollution, with diseases such as cholera increasingly emerging as a major cause of illness and death.

HALF THE WORLD'S HOSPITAL BEDS ARE OCCUPIED BY PEOPLE SUFFERING FROM WATER-BORNE DISEASES

Dams are also becoming a popular source of energy production in the developing world. These however frequently upset natural water flows, flood agricultural land, and provide breeding grounds for carriers of water borne disease. Minorities frequently bear the majority of these costs, as dams are constructed on their land to serve the energy needs of cities elsewhere.

Over 10 million people, rely on the rich natural resources of the Salween River for their livelihoods. Two dam projects in the Shan State on Thai-Burma Border are however at present being proposed to meet Burma's desperate need for electricity. Reports continue however to stress the environmental consequences of this project, citing vast and irreversible destruction of the resources which sustain local ethnic and religious minorities in the region.

MINORITIES AND INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS FREQUENTLY LOOSE CONTROL OVER THE WATER THAT IS VITAL TO THEIR COMMUNITIES

Ahwaz (Arabistan), or Khuzestan, is located on the northern tip of the Gulf and the Shatt-al- Arab waterway. The Karkhe and Karun rivers flow through Ahwaz and provide a vital source of irrigation and drinking water, sustaining traditional practices of date farming and the breeding of water buffalo. In this land famous for its rives, local communities are however now struggling to access clean and safe drinking water, as Iranian authorities have diverted much of the rivers to Persian parts of the country.

The loss and pollution of water hits local populations hard. It exacerbates endemic poverty, threatens agricultural sustainability, and is the source of many of the most deadly of diseases. UNPO works to promote awareness of the widespread impact of water pollution and scarcity, highlighting its integral link to the viability of communities across the world. As scarcity grows, the control of water has become a new front for the oppression of minority communities, making it ever more important to recognise and safeguard a people's right to their resources.

