

Statement by Mr. Pedro Arrojo Agudo, Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation at the Parliamentary Forum at the UN HLPF, entitled Message from the pandemic: bring “government” back.

13 July 2021

Honourable Members of Parliaments around the world, thank you first of all for the honour of this invitation and for your attention.

Humanity is facing, among others, a crisis that is as tragic as it is paradoxical: the Global Water Crisis on the Water Planet, the Blue Planet, with 2.2 billion people without guaranteed access to drinking water. In terms of diagnosis, and with the exception of populations in semi-arid regions severely affected by climate change that deserve urgent international attention, strictly speaking, the vast majority of these 2.2 billion people are not properly thirsty people without water in their living environments; but impoverished people living next to polluted rivers, lakes or aquifers.

Therefore, in my view, the roots of this Global Water Crisis lie at the confluence of two major critical failures:

- the failure relating unsustainability that we have caused in our aquatic ecosystems, transforming water, the key factor of life, into the most terrible vector of disease and death ever known; and
- the failure relating to inequality and poverty, under deeply immoral socio-economic systems.

From the neoliberal vision, instead of considering water as a common good or as a public good, it is considered as a simple economic resource, useful and scarce, to be managed according to the logic of the market, thus promoting a mercantilist and privatising approach. But in doing so, it transforms people into mere customers, particularly those 2.2 billion people are transformed into poor customers, with serious difficulties in paying for their water. Therefore, this approach, far from solving the Global Water Crisis, aggravates it by making the most vulnerable even more vulnerable. This approach is leading to the management of water, even as a financial asset, by promoting its entry into the Wall Street futures markets, under the speculative logic that dominates these markets.

I am deeply concerned about this. That is why my first thematic report to the UN General Assembly, scheduled to be presented on 20 October 2021 in New York focuses on the risks and impacts of the commodification and financialisation of water. I invite you to follow up on that report, but Excellencies, let me ask your attention in advance on this issue by recalling what happened in 2008 with food, managed under the speculative logic prevailing in the futures markets. In those years, following a profound deregulation of financial markets that allowed large banks to enter the food futures markets, these markets were identified as a favourable space for large speculative operations. Just when many of these large corporations had raised huge public funds to avoid bank failures due to the real estate bubble they themselves had caused, within a few months hundreds of billions of dollars were invested in food commodity futures, causing the prices of wheat, corn or rice to double and even triple, in what was a new speculative bubble. As an immediate consequence, according to the World Bank, the number of hungry people in the world increased by a further 150 million.

With regard to climate change, there is general consensus that mitigation strategies should be driven by energy transition. However, the main socio-economic impacts of climate change are generated around the water vector, which should lead to adaptation strategies being dominated by an hydrological transition. I urge you, Excellencies, to reflect on this and to work together to raise the level of attention on adaptation strategies to be promoted, based on water transition strategies.

Finally on the challenge of accelerating efforts on water and sanitation services to achieve SDG 6 in the face of the climate change, let me reflect on the lessons we are learning from the pandemic. Years ago, in the 2008 crisis, the argument of the so-called "financing gap", due to the lack of public funds to finance the needs of WASH services, made sense in the context of austerity strategies, and served to justify private investments and public-private strategies; and in saying this I am in no way trying to justify the mistake that was made with these strategies and their catastrophic consequences of poverty and inequality. But, today, it does NOT make sense. Fortunately, the pandemic has forced us to change the strategy. Indeed, trillions of dollars have been, are being and will be made available to address the pandemic and the post-pandemic socio-economic revival in the context of the Green New Deal challenge.

On the other hand, as a result of the ordeal of the pandemic, a general consensus is growing on the need to strengthen public health systems

as an unprecedented, not-for-profit, leave-no-one-behind public effort. Public investments in WASH services, as a cornerstone of public health must, in my view, be addressed as a matter of priorities, as a global democratic imperative, especially in impoverished countries and communities. The challenge is to ensure not only the development of these services, but also their affordability for the 2.2 billion impoverished people who will not be able to pay if the financializing logic that has dominated the economy in general and WASH services in particular is applied. We are talking about a democratic challenge, not a business opportunity.

The surprisingly hasty debate on global taxation, sparked by President Biden, is in my view a signal that the time has come for a new fiscal approach to better redistribute wealth and strengthen public capacities to meet the challenges of what is shaping up to be an epochal change. And, in particular, I believe that the pandemic is giving us an opportunity to rethink the close link between public health and the human rights to safe water, sanitation and hygiene, but this time with arguments reinforced by unprecedented social support generated by the suffering caused by the pandemic.

Thank you.