

Non-discrimination in assuring access: addressing inequities between present and future generations

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1. Institutional representation of the future generations

Why don't we react quickly and effectively to the approaching and more and more obvious environmental crises? We use social defence mechanisms like "slicing" or insulating the problems, shifting them in time, or rather a sheer denial. Therefore new kinds of institutions are needed in order to confront the society with these facts and urge it to act. Continuous clarification, wide range networking is necessary.

Viewpoints of long-termism should balance the short-termism built in our political systems with the periodical elections and „the quickest turnover is the best” economic and social approaches. There are, or used to be institutional solutions to this in several countries (NJ, Israel, NZ, Hungary), and there are plans in many places to introduce such institutions, even possibly on EU and/or UN level.

Ombudsmen are looking for system faults – this is an ideal trait to handle environmental conflicts and to develop and offer longer-term solutions.

2. Clean water issues in the context of other environmental problems

Water shortage and quality problems are embedded into a system of environmental conflicts:

- water management vs. water protection;
- shipping vs. water protection;
- waste management especially waste water treatment problems;
- deforestation;
- climate (disappearing glaciers, extraordinary weather phenomena, unbalanced water levels etc.).

At FGO in the Danube issue

- we had complaints about the waterway plans, as excavating the pebble layers to make the river navigable by larger ships would exert a negative influence on the drinking water and on a series of other social interests;
- we convened a conference about the ecological services of the Danube with the representatives of 17 concerned professions (from energy production and fishing to tourism, agriculture and drinking water management), afterwards we formed our opinion and sent it to the Government with 2 very simple messages: a) never decide about a conflict among the use of several ecological services, unless all the representatives of the relevant professions and stakeholders are present, b) never arrive at a decision that would totally overlook the interests of one or two ecological services.

3. Other water-related conflicts handled by FGO

The case of the planned privatisation of the 5 major Water Utility Companies of Hungary has raised a number of questions:

- In connection with climate change: can an individual company handle such an enormous risk?
- Is the natural monopoly of drinking water management an adequate field of business competition?
- Is our society satisfied with the external and frequently post factum quality control of the water produced by a private company, or we need direct state supervision over water utilities? (How does this question interrelate with the precautionary principle and with the prevention principle?)
- Was the territorial reorganisation due mostly to economic considerations (lucrative/less lucrative) reasonable from environmental and water management aspects, as well?

These questions and their public discussion were sufficient to stop the privatisation procedure, and the government reacted positively to our suggestion to start a legislative procedure on the detailed institutional guarantees of the proper operation of public utilities.

Other major issues FGO was involved in:

- thermal water re-injection into the soil;
- the Vászárhelyi Plan for the revitalisation of Tisza river with a series of large natural water reservoirs (again: we tried to support the system approach here, solutions favourable equally for nature protection, micro-climate, agriculture, tourism etc.);
- water pollution cases in connection with extreme weather (e.g. canal overflow);
- water base protection, the water utilities should buy the lands belonging to the first protective zone, but they cannot afford this;
- an other typical problem is the pollution from underground storage tanks.

Considering all these things together, the message stemming from the FGO's work is the system approach, that is the water quality problems cannot be solved unless they are considered and handled as part of a larger set of environmental problems.