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Written statement* submitted by Associazione Comunita Papa Giovanni XXIII, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[5 February 2023]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



On Social Forum 2022

Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII (APG23) participated in the Social Forum that took place in Geneva on 3 and 4 November 2022 focusing on “water for human rights and sustainable development: good practices, lessons learned and challenges in the implementation of the International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018–2028, with a view to making a human rights contribution to the conference on the midterm review of the Decade, to be held in 2023.”

APG23 contributed to the discussion on several occasions stressing some important points regarding the right to water and sanitation and sustainable development.

Through the different panels, many issues have been tackled regarding water, such as water for health, water for development, water for climate, resilience and environment, water for peace and cooperation, governance participation and partnerships.

Water is a basic human need. Water is life and is indispensable for integral human development, and it is strictly linked to other rights such as the right to health and the right to life.

In his encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis reminded us: “... access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right, since it is essential to human survival and, as such, is a condition for the exercise of other human rights. Our world has a grave social debt towards the poor who lack access to drinking water, because they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity.” (1)

Yet billions of people are denied this fundamental right.

APG23 underlines how the right to water and sanitation is increasingly threatened by the phenomenon of climate change. In 2022, the Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation in his report entitled «Special thematic report on climate change and the human rights to water and sanitation» (2), outlined that water scarcity, droughts, and floods, exacerbated by climate change, will increasingly generate conflicts in the future. Many areas of the world will become uninhabitable and force hundreds of millions of people to move and migrate.

Hence, it is a fact that climate change is and will negatively impact water security. The consequent conflicts for the use of water would affect especially the most vulnerable people and groups on the planet, such as persons living in poverty in rural areas.

Moreover, APG23 would like to stress and recall another interlinkage: the one between the right to water and the right to development. As underlined many times by relevant human rights mechanisms, the separation between development and human rights is artificial: development itself is and has to be considered a human right. It is evident that for a complete realisation of development, access to water and sanitation must be ensured: in this sense, the Declaration on the Right to Development explicitly mentions the «inalienable right to full sovereignty over all their natural wealth and resources», and water is the first and the most important of all the natural resources.

As a civil society organisation working on the ground, we have too often witnessed how degradation and exploitation of natural resources, together with adverse effects of climate change, have negatively impacted the lives of individuals, groups, and communities, especially those who are already enduring poverty, discrimination and systematic marginalisation.

As an example, we brought forward during the Social Forum the situation of the Mapuche people, the largest Indigenous group in Chile who keeps struggling to protect their ancestral lands. Hydroelectric power plants, dams, and the expansion of extractive plantations of exotic trees severely affect natural resources, threatening the ecosystem, polluting water sources, as well as destroying the environment and biodiversity.

In the Mapuche worldview, water is a generator of life, not just a commodity to be exploited; the preservation of natural elements is an essential part of their spirituality and cultural integrity.

The worldview of Indigenous peoples offers us a fundamental key to facing the challenges of climate change, pollution, and water scarcity; in this regard, the right of Indigenous peoples to free, prior, and informed consent has to be always respected. The full participation of the indigenous communities in the decision-making process has to be provided in order to develop strategies aimed at the sustainable use of natural resources, including sustainable water management, sharing the benefits of biodiversity, and respecting the ecosystem.

In the "Progress towards the realization of the human rights to water and sanitation (2010-2020)" report was stated: "globalization and the neoliberal wave have weakened the role of the State in the provision and regulation of water and sanitation services, and the imbalance of power has at times affected the exercise of the human rights to water and sanitation". (3)

Facing and overcoming these structural factors and imbalances is crucial for the life itself of the too many peoples and communities hit by the denial or the strong limitation of the fundamental human right to water.

We would like to underline three critical messages:

- 1) Prioritizing human rights over profits. Given its deep value for human life and dignity and being a fundamental right, water should never be reduced to a commodity to be traded or an object of speculation without regard to the adverse human rights impact of the financialization of public goods.
- 2) Democratizing governance of natural resources. As also reminded during this Social Forum, water governance schemes based on privatization and extractive business models have shown their failure. Democratic, transparent and accountable decision-making processes led by meaningful community participation and citizens engagement are needed to ensure fair, equitable and sustainable governance of natural resources and public goods, according to the right to development-based approach.
- 3) Linking environmental health and human well-being. Every stage of water governance processes should be aligned with the pursuit of human and community well-being and the recently recognized human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

Finally, we would like to highlight that from 22 to 24 March 2023, there will be in New York the United Nations 2023 Water Conference. We do hope that the Conference will address the deep root causes of the denied access to water for billions of people in the world, especially the national and international obstacles to the implementation of the right to development to which the respect, protection and fulfilment of the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation is strictly linked.

(1) https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf (30)

(2) Special thematic report on climate change and the human rights to water and sanitation by the Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation (January 2022)

(3) A/HRC/45/11