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Virtual Water, Virtual Sun

Julian Manduca

Friday, December 06, 2002

Peace, development and environment issues are often interlinked and it would seem to be a truism that we will not enjoy a wonderful environment unless we have peace and sustainable development.

War takes a tremendous toll on both the environment and development. Finding ways of long lasting peace should be on the agenda of all 'politicians.' The prospects are not looking too good at the moment, but it certainly is not the first time in humanity's short stay on earth.

The world political map is not full of visionaries working towards world peace, even if some politicians do work against war and could probably be relied upon to back peace initiatives.

Most Maltese politicians are usually too spineless to oppose warmongers like the US and Britain and some would even argue that Malta does well to support the wars of the major powers.

I reject that notion outright and long for the day when a Maltese government clearly states that it opposes the type of military interventions the US and its allies have conducted in Afghanistan, Kosovo and Iraq.

Peace may be difficult to achieve in an atmosphere of distrust and growing tension between weak and strong countries. This was evident at the Earth Summit in Johannesburg when a great chance was lost to address some of the major issues that have left millions destitute.

I did meet a man of vision recently. His name will not be well known to any of you and he is certainly not in a position to take decisions that would have a major impact on the future of the world. But he does go about his mission with fervour and tries to influence those who are better placed to make important political decisions.

His name is Hans Guenter Brauch and he is a political scientist. He is promoting an idea which is not totally his own but to which he has added a major part. The idea is simple in its formulation but will not be without major

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Background

Climatologists have calculated that within the next 50 years the hotter parts of the world (mainly what we commonly refer to as the south) will be getting much hotter and drier. Seasonally, by 2050, average temperature is projected to increase by 4.3°C in winter; 4°C in spring; 2.7°C in summer; and 2.3°C in autumn in the northern hemisphere. There is a projected temperature increase for each month, however the greatest temperature increase is likely to be experienced in January, February, and March (at 5°C, 7°C, and 6°C, respectively).

Such increases will put a great strain on the way of life of those in the south and with the expected decrease in average rainfall of between 6 and 12%, Africa, South America and even parts of the Mediterranean will experience their driest patches in living memory.

While populations are not expected to increase dramatically in the north, the south will continue to experience dramatic population increases that by 2050 are expected to add another 200 million to the North African and Mediterranean populations and about 40 million each to Egypt, Iran, and Turkey alone.

More people and less rain can only mean one thing. The North African countries, some of which are not short of cash or oil at the moment should be planning for the years to come. Without water no food can be grown.

Prof Tony Allan from the University of London has pushed forward his ideas on 'Water security in the Middle East and the Mediterranean,' and sees a potential solution in virtual water.

"Virtual water is the water embedded in key traded commodities such as wheat. It requires 1000 tonnes of water to raise a tonne of wheat. The price of wheat has been falling on world markets for at least a century. Wheat has been available on the world market at half its production cost during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Virtual water provides an economically invisible and politically silent solution to the region's water problem."

Solution

Wheat from the north can be the South's water.



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Problem

But how will the South pay for what it gets from the North. In comes Hans Brauch and introduces 'virtual sun'.

As I have said, the South, that always had a lot of sun, is about to 'benefit' from even more. The South is best placed for creating energy from the sun but, so far, except for Cyprus and Israel, Mediterranean and North African countries have not been able to profit from their strategic position.

Brauch has done a bit of research with the oil producing companies to look at what energy sources are likely to be most exploited by 2050. Solar energy comes out on top.

Solution

The North can produce its own solar energy, but it may make more sense to get it from the South. Virtual sun in exchange for virtual water and the equation is complete. The possibility is being looked into of having energy from the sun pumped northwards in hydrogen form via a large pipe crossing Tunisia into Italy. Brauch has been meeting politicians and encouraging them to set up technical institutes in the Mediterranean and African countries. Malta may be too small for the kind of installations that are being considered – but Malta should manage to produce most of its energy needs from alternative sources.

It would be very important, says Brauch that especially the sale of energy is in the hands of thousands of small enterprises that can all benefit by selling the energy they produce to the grid. If the energy supply is to be controlled by big business, or worse still, Northern interests, that would defeat the purpose as a certain democratisation of the process is necessary. That is why Brauch has been encouraging scientists to teach those in the South all they need to know about alternative energy.

The sun for water deal will make north and south interdependent. Interdependence as we know has been the reason for peace between most developed countries for the past 60 years.

It was not difficult for me to put those words to paper and it will be much more difficult to implement such an ambitious plan when there are no doubt so many ifs and buts. However, dreamers will dream on, as often that is all that is left to them.