

March 22: World Water Day

In cities it is easy to take water for granted. It arrives in our taps each day, is available for our gardens, is safe to drink, flows down our rivers to the sea, and increases the value of houses if they border on lake, river or sea. We are less likely to take it for granted this year when we have seen the disastrous and fatal rain and flooding in Queensland and New South Wales.

In rural areas, however, water cannot be taken for granted. People there can endure years of drought that puts their livelihood at risk, makes them ration water for washing and showering. In other years, as we have experienced in 2022, floods can damage crops, destroy roads and railway lines, drive people from houses and make them unlivable, cause food shortages in rural towns and cut supplies to cities. These patterns of excess or absence of water will surely be exacerbated by global warming.

Water is also a source of conflict. Political scientists have described the shortage of water as the most likely cause of wars in the future. Recently in the Northern Territory the massive allocation of water reserves to a mining company was attacked by Indigenous communities for because of the threat it posed to them, their environment and their culture. In Victoria the demand by a coal mining company for diversion of water for a huge lake to remediate their mines has also raised fear for the environment of which the mine is part. In New South Wales the projected raising of the Warragamba Dam in order to protect downstream communities from flooding has been attacked because it will destroy Indigenous sites and affect the broader ecosystem. In addition, the allocation of water from the Murray Darling Basin is the source of constant conflict between the States through which the river system runs and between the irrigators, farmers and conservationists and investors with their different interests. All of these conflicts set wealthy and powerful interests against those representing the environment and the common good. When private interests win the losers are always those who are already disadvantaged.

Our own accompaniment of people who are disadvantaged makes these disputes of interest to us at Jesuit Social Services. The people whom we serve are at disproportionate risk of having their water cut off and of suffering the effects of drought or flood. They cannot take water for granted.

We recognise the need for a shared acknowledgment that water is a gift that sustains life, both of human beings and of the whole world of which we are part. It is a public good, not a commodity to be owned, bought and sold at the whim of those with the wealth and power to take possession of it. Governments have a responsibility for regulating its use in a way that preserves and sustains the natural environment of which it is a vital part, and allows communities all along the rivers and the underground reserves that carry it to share equitably and sustainably in it. This entails addressing climate change as a pressing priority.

This shared responsibility does not stop at state and national boundaries, Nations building dams near catchment areas of a river system that sustains many other nations must take responsibility for the effect this will have on the natural environment downstream and the people who are part of it. As in so many other areas, the key to developing our resources is to respect the human dignity of each person involved in the development, and the common good of the whole communities whose life depends in direct and indirect ways on the water and the wider ecology of which it is part. Water is a gift to be respected, treasured and shared to sustain lives.

By Fr Andrew Hamilton