

ABRUZZO, ITALIA: A STRUGGLE IN DEFENCE OF WATER AND FOR CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION

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In Abruzzo, a mountainous region in southern Italy, a coalition of citizens' groups has not only stopped water privatisation in several provinces, but also initiated much needed reforms to improve public water delivery through user participation. For decades, water supply in the region has been profoundly unsustainable, with neglected aqueducts and many water leakages. The coalition, called Alleanza per l'acqua, grew out of opposition to several large-scale infrastructure projects that endangered the region's environment and its water resources. After victory in two of Abruzzo's provinces, the next goal is an overhaul of the regional water laws in order to rule out privatisation and guarantee water as a common good and a human right through public water delivery. The coalition believes that citizen participation in water management is the way to secure environmentally and socially sustainable public services.

WATER IN ITALY: GROWING OVER-CONSUMPTION AND LEAKAGE RATES

Theoretically, Italy has annual water reserves of 155 cubic kilometres, which means 2700 cubic metres per person. The unevenness of the flow, however, reduces reserves to 2000 cubic metres per person, or 5,5 cubic metres per day. Compared with other countries, Italy's overall water situation is relatively abundant.¹ But while there should be enough water for all users everywhere in Italy, water delivery is a real concern for many Italians, not least because of the very bad state of the aqueducts. The situation is especially critical in Southern Italy where water delivery is often interrupted and one out of three households does not have a regular water supply.

Water leakages are now a constant feature of the Italian water system. An average of 39% of the water running through the aqueducts is lost due to poor maintenance. The leakages are a major reason why Italy has the highest per capita water consumption in Europe, but actual water use in households is also unsustainably high. Italians consume on average 213 litres of clean tap water every day, of which only 1% is for drinking; 39% is used for personal hygiene, 12% in washing machines and 20% for flushing toilets.² At the same time, the consumption of bottled water is widespread,

¹ According to the United Nations, a country faces "chronic water stress" if its water revenue is less than 1000 cubic metres per year per person and "absolute water stress" if its water revenue is less than 500 cubic metres per year per person. Valdarno Social Forum, *Dossier sull'acqua*, 2003, p6.

² Total consumption including lost water is about 400 litres per person per day. *Il Messaggero*, 6 June 2005.

despite the fact that tap water is cleaner, safer and more sustainable.³ So, in addition to the need to improve the infrastructure, increasing public awareness about the need to save water is also a matter of urgency.

In 1989, the Italian Parliament passed a law to improve all aspects of water management: Act 138/89 on hydrographic basins. The aim of the law was to regulate the different uses of water (agricultural, industrial, domestic) and to better protect rivers and other water sources. Five years later, the government passed another law to “reverse the tide” and overcome the crisis of its water system with regard to drinking water, the so-called “Galli Act”. The law has proved only partially successful in reforming the water sector. Importantly, it also opened the way for a larger role for the private sector in water management.

As a consequence, several regions in Italy (some ruled by right-wing, some by left-wing coalitions) have introduced private water management, referred to as “public-private partnerships”. Far from the promised improvements, the result has been tariff increases and worsening of the service. In the region of Toscana, for instance, tariffs have increased by an average of 24% and in some municipalities the increase was up to 120%. In the Lazio region, water quality has deteriorated and important aquifers have become infected by salmonella and entero viruses.⁴ Leakage rates, already rising before privatisation, have increased further.

Abruzzo, a region in southern Italy, is an exception to the privatisation trend. As a result of civil society mobilisation, several provinces in the region have refused the privatisation option and instead chosen reforms to improve public water delivery. Civil society groups in Abruzzo advocate a system of public water delivery that is participatory, transparent and environmentally and socially sustainable. Their vision is shaped by decades of struggle against environmentally destructive projects promoted by the Italian government without consulting people.

ABRUZZO: SUSTAINABILITY ENDANGERED

Abruzzo is a small region in Southern Italy, with more than a million inhabitants living on 10,798 square kilometres (out of a total population of 60 million and a surface of 301,268 square kilometres). Abruzzo, two-thirds of which is covered by the Apennini

³ About 50% of Italian the population drinks bottled mineral water daily and Italians are the first consumers of bottled mineral water of the world. Analysis of the water goes beyond the purpose of this article, but it is well known that tap water is better and safer (since it must pass through several tests) than bottled mineral water and much less damaging to the environment. Bottled mineral water is considered by Italian law to be “therapeutic water” which means it can contain five times the quantity of arsenic and 40 times the quantity of manganese allowed in tap water. Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and World Health Organisation (WHO) consider both these substances to be dangerous.

<http://www.carta.org/rivista/settimanale/2005/10/10nobile.htm>
<http://www.carta.org/rivista/settimanale/2005/10/10pallante.htm>

⁴ The aquifers of Capodacqua (Spigno Saturnia), Mazzoccolo (Formia) and Fiumicello (Priverno). The aquifers of Capodacqua and Mazzoccolo provide water to over 100,000 inhabitants. The aquifer of Fiumicello serves the municipalities of Maenza, Priverno, Prossedi, Roccagorga, Roccasecca dei volsci and Sonnino. http://www.sudpontinosocialforum.org/campagne_acqua.htm

mountain chain, is situated between the region of Lazio (with the national capital Rome) and the Adriatic Sea on its east side. The mountains in the Abruzzo, a “European green region”, are very rich in biodiversity, especially the area around Gran Sasso, the highest peak of the Apennini Mountains. It is an area of over 150,000 hectares, has been a national park since 1991 and it forms the biggest basin in Southern Europe. Water from Gran Sasso flows through several rivers and serves the water needs of about 800,000 users in Abruzzo.

Despite the biodiversity and natural beauty of the region, the Italian government has, since the late 1960s, built a range of expensive mega-infrastructure projects which have had a devastating impact on the environment. Civil society campaigns saved some rivers, but most were spoiled by rectification and cementing in the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, investments in maintenance of the region’s water aqueducts were grossly insufficient. The state of Abruzzo’s water delivery infrastructure is far below the national average and the leakage rate for water passing through the aqueducts is no less than 57%.

GRAN SASSO - DEFENDING WATER AND THE ENVIRONMENT

In 1968, the Italian government started building two motorway tunnels under San Grasso. The construction work damaged the mountain’s aquifer, workers died and an entire village was flooded. The aquifer dropped from 1600 metres above sea level to the present 1060 metres.⁵ This in turn reduced the water flow in springs within an area of 50 kilometres. The next blow to the area’s fragile environment came in 1980 when the government started to build three huge laboratories under the mountain. These laboratories for physics experiments are 100 metres long, 30 metres wide and 30 metres high. After seven years of digging tunnels and constructing the laboratories, 2,120,000 cubic metres of rock had been removed.

In 1990, the Italian parliament approved plans to enlarge the laboratories and build an additional tunnel - plans that would harm the aquifer – and local citizens began to campaign. The use and release of highly toxic chemicals from the laboratories which contaminated two rivers, was also severely criticised.⁶ The coalition grew to include environmental groups, trade unions, academics, left wing parties and many local authorities. The mobilisation peaked in 2002 when 20,000 people demonstrated against the project. A petition by the environmental organisation WWF and the Abruzzo Social Forum was signed by more than 30,000 people. As result of the growing pressure, both the enlargement of the laboratories and the construction of the tunnel were stopped.⁷

⁵ Abruzzo Social Forum, *Dossier Gran Sasso*, 2002, p3.

⁶ Evidently experiments were carried on with no care for the environment and the water’s rivers. WWF proved that about 50 litres of neurotoxic chemicals (1,2,4 trimethylbenzene) were poured in the Mavone River and into Val Vomano’s aquifer in August 2002.

<http://www.wwf.it/GestioneNewsLocale/AllLocaleRicercaTematica.asp?Locale=abruzzo>

⁷ Concerning the third tunnel, a long legal procedure resulted in the funds for the construction of the tunnel being transferred to a “special commissioner” in charge of making the laboratories safer.

Some of the experiments involving toxic chemicals ended in 2003 and one of the laboratories was closed following a court case initiated by WWF. The victory of the citizen protest was impressive but not total: chemical experiments in the remaining laboratories continue to endanger the aquifer.

The successful struggle was not only about protecting the region's nature and environment, but the defence of clean water resources was a central issue. Moreover, the authoritarian behaviour of the Italian government and its lack of respect for and consultation with local communities angered the citizens' groups. It strengthened their conviction that democratisation and genuine citizen participation in decision-making is a pre-condition for positive change.

THE BATTLE AROUND THE ABRUZZO-PUGLIA AQUEDUCT

Around the time of the large mobilisations in defence of Gran Sasso, another major threat to the region's water resources emerged. In 2002, the Italian government started preparing a plan for transferring water from Abruzzo to the region of Puglia. The plan involved transferring about 270 million cubic metres of water from three of Abruzzo's rivers (Pescara, Sangro and Vomano) to Puglia through aqueducts and submarine pipes. The project, the biggest water transfer plan in Europe after the controversial Ebro project in Spain (terminated in spring 2004), would have a devastating ecological impact, including the biological death of the three rivers (whose water flows would have been halved), lowering of the aquifers surrounding the rivers and negative effects on the biological equilibrium of the coastal areas. The project was to be led by the Anglo-American corporation Black and Veatch, a giant consortium involved in private water delivery in numerous countries around the world, as well as in the "reconstruction" business in Iraq.

Civil society groups and municipalities heavily criticised the project, not least on economic grounds. They pointed out that since the leakage rate of aqueducts in Puglia is about 50%, about half of the water transferred from Abruzzo would have been lost. Moreover, aqueducts in Abruzzo have the highest rate of leaks in Italy (57%), so the most logical solution to the water needs of Puglia would be to invest in improving the efficiency of the existing water system. As a result of citizens' mobilisation, the regional government refused to approve the project and in 2003 the water transfer plan was shelved altogether.⁸ In July 2005, longtime water campaigner Riccardo Petrella became the new president of the water company of Puglia, which is good news for a further shift towards more sustainable water policies.

⁸ <http://www.wwf.it/GestioneNewsLocale/AllLocaleElencoNews.asp?sLocale=abruzzo>

THE STRUGGLE AGAINST PRIVATISATION AND FOR A PARTICIPATORY PUBLIC SERVICE

The 1994 Galli Act has resulted in a major reorganisation of the Italian water sector.⁹ The major changes are:

- The introduction of so-called Integrated Water Systems in charge of all aspects of water management, including water catchment, water purification, water delivery, sewage and water treatment.
- Every region has formed several ATOs (Optimal Territorial Ambit) which are in charge of deciding how to manage the Integrated Water System. These ATOs typically cover a large number of municipalities. In Abruzzo, for instance, six ATOs have been established.

The Galli Act succeeded in overcoming the fragmentation that characterised the Italian water system (there were about 8,000 water administrators in 1994) and to clarify and improve the regulatory framework. At the same time, it also opened up water management to private companies.

In 2002 the right-wing government passed an amendment to the Galli Act, with the intention to privatise the water sector. Thanks to the mobilisation of social movements and hundreds of municipalities, the proposed legislation was amended in 2003 to ensure public water delivery is still an option for managing the Integrated Water Systems. Today, the ATOs choose between three main ways of management:

- Water supply concessions decided through a bidding process that involves public utilities from different regions across Italy.
- A mixed (public and private) joint-stock company in which the private partner is selected through a bidding process.
- An “in house” public company (owned by the regional governments).

In Abruzzo, *Alleanza per l’acqua* (a coalition of civil society, environmentalist groups, trade unions and social fora) mobilised in favour of the third option: ensuring water would remain in public hands. The aim of *Alleanza per l’acqua* is to change the statutes of Abruzzo’s ATOs and rule out privatisation by defining public delivery as the only option.¹⁰ Civil society is far from happy with the unreliable and inefficient water supply. The current system can hardly be called public, due to the lack of response and

⁹ The act ratified two key principles:

- water is a public good that must be saved and protected in order to guarantee the right to water to future generations;
- domestic consumption has priority over agricultural and industrial consumption.

¹⁰ *Alleanza per l’acqua* includes WWF, Adiconsum, Abruzzo Social Forum, Rifondazione Comunista, CGIL Abruzzo, Giovani Comuniste/i, Abruzzo Pro Natura, COBAS, Marevivo, Mila Donnambiente, Comitato No-WTO L’Aquila, Laboratorio Politico L’Aquila, Movimentazioni, Radiocittà, Kabawill, Abruzzo Crocevia, Coop. Il Mandorlo Commercio Equo e Solidale, Partito dei Comunisti Italiani, Federazione Italiana dei Giovani Comunisti, Codacons Abruzzo, ARCO Chieti, Montesilvano Sostenibile, Sinistra Giovanile Abruzzo, Comitato per la Tutela delle Acque del Gran Sasso, E.Co.Fe.Bio., Comitato No-Bolkestein Abruzzo, Verdi, Passage to the South, I Girotondi, FILCEM-Cgil, ARCI Abruzzo, Deposito dei Segni, Aprile – Sinistra DS. See <http://www.abruzzosocialforum.org/>

accountability. A shady patronage system exists that is tolerated by most of the political parties. Privatisation, however, is not an alternative as it is likely to increase tariffs and unlikely to improve services. Environmentalist groups moreover warn that private water management is not going to lead to more sustainable water policies, since these companies are not interested in reducing water consumption.

Instead, campaigners argue that a participatory and transparent model of public management can guarantee water for all in a socially and environmentally sustainable way. These are not merely slogans. Concretely the campaigners propose that civil society (environmentalists, trade unions, etc.) should be represented in the decision-making committees of the ATOs (with the right to speak but without voting rights). In order to avoid co-optation, civil society representatives should not receive a salary for these activities. Citizens, moreover, should be invited to participate in the budgeting process. These are two first steps towards democratisation and citizens' control over water management.

Other key civil society demands are the delivery of 50 litres of water free of charge as a social measure for the poorest, as well as the allocation of the 0,7% of the regional budget for international co-operation projects. The principles of the "Water Manifesto" should become guidelines for managing the entire water system and thus included in the statutes of the ATOs.¹¹

The civil society campaign for improved public water delivery has achieved several major victories already. As a result of the mobilisation, the ATO of the provinces of Pescara and Chieti chose to reject privatisation. The ATO chose public water management, including enhanced citizen participation and implementation of social tariffs. The next step will be to convince the other five ATOs in the region to follow this example. By choosing effective and sustainable public water management, Abruzzo can show the way to other regions in Italy.

¹¹ De Sanctis Augusto, A. (ed). 2004. *A come Abruzzo A come acqua*. p9-12. See also Petrella, R. 2001. *Water Manifesto: Arguments For A World Water Control Contract*. Zed Books.

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