The human right to water:
An interdisciplinary focus and contributions on the central role of public policies in water and sanitation management

Workshop 23-24 February 2017 - Aristoteles tells us that, according to Thales of Miletus "water is the beginning of everything". This Greek intuition has been confirmed by modern science that considers water and its cycle the basis for life in our planet and what differentiates it from other planets in our system. Therefore, if this life cycle was substantially disrupted because of climate change, the Earth would become something like Mars or any other lifeless planet. Unfortunately, as Pope Francis indicates in his Encyclical Laudato Si', it is human activity which uses fossil materials what causes global warming and damages the water cycle. As an example, gases that produce the greenhouse effect and contribute to global warming have already reduced the eternal glaciers that provide clean water to our rivers to half of their size.

Access to safe water and sanitation is an essential condition for a decent living. It is also a right which does not admit any possible disagreement and requires a conscientious work. United Nations and the WHO generated data show that in 2014 about 748 million people still did not have access to drinking water.

The universal nature of this right, which is a right to life itself, challenges us and calls for the construction of global, state and regional public policies vital for a full human existence and the development of nations.

The access to drinking water and sanitation is a comprehensive urban development action that helps urban planning and organization and also counteracts poverty and malnutrition. Access to this resource reduces vulnerability in the most excluded segments of the population. It allows, for example, reducing the risk for women and children in marginal areas who frequently need to travel endless kilometers in search of safe water, improves social mobility and reduces barriers in access to education and employment.

Water is, however, a recent topic in the international agenda. There is a need to provide legal, technical, social and political mechanisms that enable the construction of an authentic 'culture of water' in the common care of our common home. This is a major challenge for international organizations as well as estates searching to build a framework to cope with the existing crisis of access to water.

At present, a high number of local Constitutions still do not include the access to water as a right. Likewise, it is still under debate whether access to safe water needs to be considered as a public service, as a universal right or as a commodity. The protection of water resources, education for the care of water and the access to water and sanitation should become a priority in government agendas and be central to public policies provided its potential scarcity and its undeniable contribution to the public good and human dignity.

Joint visions from scientists, politicians, educators and leaders are crucial in order to give way to a real culture of water and peace. Equally significant is the contribution of water and sanitation workers who organize themselves to be in the frontline of commitment with their communities, building and making real the public value of water and sanitation and also questioning any privatization or commercial attempt which may change the status of citizens to that of clients.

This workshop aims to create an interdisciplinary space for a debate, and a thoughtful analysis and proposals in order to achieve public policies in water and sanitation management that guarantee the effective contribution of science, culture, politics and technological advancements to the attainment of a fairer world of greater social justice and solidarity. This focus may, in turn, allow peace and the prevention of conflicts leaving it clear that political and economic interests should not prevail over human life.