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Environmental Change and Security Program

ECSP Pathways to Peace: Stories of Environment, Health, and Conflict

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Edited Transcript — Shewaye Deribe

Shewaye Deribe:

Good afternoon, my name is Shewaye. I'm from Ethiopia. We are from five different parts of the world, from Latin America, from Africa, from Asia from North America, but we are talking about the same issue, about water. And we talk about similar things. So this shows that water is common for all of us because it is the base of our life, our survival. And the freshwater resource, which is the base of our lives, it's one of the most limited resources in the world. And this resource, it is nowadays decreasing due to climate change and different management problems which occur in the watersheds. For example, we are talking about conflict, which is related to water. Why are we going to conflict? We are all humans. We know that all of us need water. So I think it is a lack altruism, of mutual thinking which is leading us to this type of conflict.

So, to avoid this type of problem, I think all of us, we have to cooperate, irrespective of our political boundaries, because water and other natural resources, they pass political boundaries. For example, my country, Ethiopia, is a mysterious country. I know that all of you know that my country is one of the poorest countries in the world and suffering highly from climate problems and associated conflicts among other things. The country is mysterious because it is the source for 12 big water basins. These water basins are supplying water for people -- more than 200 million -- within the country and beyond the country's boundaries, especially in countries like Sudan and Egypt. So, when we say I'm here just to share with you my experience, especially in relation to water resource of Ethiopia and the prevailing situation and especially my organization, Ethio-Wetlands and Natural Resources Association, our goal is to reverse the current situation. Generally, the climatic change, again, rapid population growth, again, watershed degradation -- these are the major things which are affecting the sources of water. I have here a PowerPoint presentation, maybe if I have time later on, I can show you some of the pictures.



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So, generally, this watershed degradation, it is killing the source of water because the fresh water is stored in the wetlands, forests, and also in mountaintops. But nowadays, due to the degradation of the watershed, they cannot store water. So, the watersheds will not regulate the flow of rivers. After rainfall, the water goes automatically downstream, which results in rapid flooding and causes the death of people and animals downstream and also the loss of infrastructure. At the same time, this running water carries a large amount of fertile soil from the uplands. Therefore, people living upstream are getting starved. They are suffering due to loss of resources and due to loss of productivity of the land.

Downstream dwellers, they are also suffering from high silt accumulation in the dams and other water storage structures. The upstream areas have low capacity to restore their water stores; that means the forests, wetlands and other ecosystems. So, this thing is creating potential for conflict. Because the downstream areas need water, the upstream again needs water. The population is growing and together with development the demand for water is also increasing, both within Ethiopia and in downstream countries.

So, how can we harmonize these downstream and upstream users' need for water, especially in this changing climatic situation? To reverse the situation, my organization, Ethio-Wetlands and Natural Resources Association, is a small organization and working in two places in the Nile basin. We are implementing community-based projects. These community-based projects are focused on different activities. These activities are very much integrated. The activities focus on population issues, especially on family planning. The activities also focus also on water and sanitation; that means providing clean water for people. The activities also focus on watershed management, how can we rehabilitate the watershed? How can we stop rapid soil degradation? How can we stop the movement of silt from the upland and the accumulation of silt downstream? How can we improve the water storing capacity of the upland?

In addition to that, this activity also focuses on livelihood improvement for people because an increasing number of people -- these poor, poor people -- are dependent on natural resources. So, if the dependence of poor people on natural resources continues, degradation of the environment will continue, then the shortage of water continues and that will create a favorable situation for conflict, creating a complicated situation for future generations. Therefore, the steps which are to be taken today will also contribute, not only for the present generation but also the coming generations. Our activities are very much focused on this



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area. It is just to reverse the current land degradation and then avoid, or, at least, mitigate conditions which stimulate or fuel a conflict situation.



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