Case 2

Time for a new compass: **drinkable rivers**

By Li An Phoa

Last summer, I spent sixty days walking the length of the river Maas (Meuse), a total of 1,061 kilometres from its source in France to the North Sea. Along the way, I carried out a study of the quality of the water in the Maas with local people and spoke to children, entrepreneurs, administrators, journalists, teachers and directors about my campaign for a new social compass: drinkable rivers.

Rivers are the resultant of an entire watershed. They constitute part of the small fraction of fresh water available on Earth - water that is crucial for all life. Just think about it: we were once able to drink the water in our rivers but in just a few generations we have poisoned them.

Economic growth

Fourteen years ago, I spent a month canoeing on the Rupert River in Canada. At the time, the water along the entire length of the river, from the source to the sea, was drinkable. Then, under the guise of economic development, a silver mine was opened on the Rupert. Less than three years later, the tears rolled down my cheeks as I held the hand of an indigenous woman whose family had been living on the river for centuries. In no time, the mercury used to mine silver had poisoned the river, the fish and the indigenous population. With a single intervention, on the basis of a compass geared to economic growth, the water was no longer drinkable and the quality of life in the Rupert River basin was destroyed.

Time for a reset!

The social compass in the Netherlands is also set incorrectly. Our compass – guided by economic growth like in Canada – promotes the development of countless Contaminants of Emerging Concern (CECs). More than 50,000(!) substances seep into our environment every day, some of them ending up in our drinking water. For example, at least 140,000 kilos of medicine residues (not even including metformin, a treatment for diabetes) are found in the river Maas every year.

> "Together we can make our rivers drinkable again"

These substances are known as externalities – side effects of a compass geared to economic growth. Today, no one can ignore these side effects any longer as 15 million people depend on the Maas for drinking-water. Climate destabilisation is a reality and the time for tackling side effects has passed. It is time to reset our compass.

Drinkable Rivers

The Rhine authorities know the importance of setting the compass correctly. Following the environmental disaster in Basel in 1986 – a fire at a chemical factory which released toxic chemicals into the river and caused the deaths of masses of fish – the authorities adopted the Rhine Action Programme in which they formulated the target of restoring salmon to the Rhine by 2000. The programme has been a success! I therefore propose that we now set our compass to drinkable rivers. Every inhabitant of this planet – whether they live in a mangrove forest or a desert – is part of a watershed and would benefit from drinkable rivers. The same applies for the salmon, the otter and the willow tree, whose pollen also sustains the wild bee. Drinkable rivers represent more than just clean water, because rivers can only be drinkable if the entire watershed is healthy and in balance. Drinkable rivers are therefore an indicator of the health of a habitat. I would therefore like our social compass to be guided by the following question: "Does this behaviour, this measure or this innovation contribute to drinkable rivers?"

Step by step

Together we can make our rivers drinkable again. Step by step, in the same way I walked the length of the river Maas. In association with network organisations such as the Mayors for a Drinkable Maas, we are pursuing a four-step plan that should culminate in drinkable rivers. Step one: *experience your river*. By making rivers accessible for walking, fishing or swimming, we will re-establish a relationship with them. Step two: *love your river*. With experience, love will grow. Step three: *care for your river*. Step four: *drinkable rivers*. A river that is drinkable for all life on earth. ❮

Li An Phoa

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