

## TRANSAQUA FROM DREAM TO REALITY ?

It's with great pleasure that I participate to this meeting to talk to you about Lake Chad.

Even better, I'll tell you that - after 35 years that I have been writing and talking about Lake Chad, about how to avoid its progressive drying, about the best means to contrast the ever more evident desertification, a tragedy for the survival of millions of people depending on what used to be the fourth sweet-water Lake in Africa, after having listened to reams of useless commentaries and dozens of beautiful articles about the argument - here, today I feel rather satisfied.

In fact, I have for some time "passed the baton" as you say in the relay race. After 35 years of general indifference, in these last months there has been an official statement of conscience: the interested african Countries have decided to check the technical feasibility of "Transaqua – an idea for Sahel".

At this point, a summary of this Project is necessary, so as illustrated by my colleague Eng. Andrea Mangano in the next speech.

I will just limit myself to consider some of the most significant historical aspects.

Between 1982 and 1985, Bonifica, a Consulting Engineering firm belonging to the IRI group, published three technical-promotional documents in three languages (see the site [www.transaquaproject.it](http://www.transaquaproject.it)).

The then Chairman of IRI presented Transaqua at the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992, where myself presented the idea of the project at the Italian Embassy in Rio.

In 1988, a popular scientific program of the Italian national television RAI effectively illustrated the Transaqua idea, hosting Mr. Bukar Shaib, then Chairman of the LCBC (Lake Chad Basin Commission). In that occasion, Mr. Shaib characterized as "*catastrophic*" the condition of the Lake. In his opinion, Lake Chad "*constitutes a barrier to the spread of the desert*" which, in the absence of initiatives, "*will cross the Sahel zone and reach Central Africa*" he said. During that same TV interview, Mr. Shaib made it clear that he considered the project of

water transfer from the Congo basin to the Chad basin as the only one possible and reported that he had solicited an engagement by UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) during a summit of the leaders of the four coastal Countries in April 1984. So, he thanked Bonifica for having developed on its own initiative the idea of Transaqua (“*we haven’t asked anything to Bonifica*”he said), declaring also that there was the political will to save “*from 10 to 20 million people that didn’t intend to become refugees*” and concluded: “*Us, political leaders, we cannot cross our arms and sit down*”.

The member countries of the LCBC didn’t show in that period the same interest in the Transaqua Idea. Maybe they considered it excessively ambitious, megalomaniac, utopian and therefore unfeasible, an opinion largely shared, then and now, by many international Agencies.

Despite the suggestions of several Italian diplomatic officials favorable to a technical study of the “*idea, the only one able to save Lake Chad*”, the Development Agency of the Italian Foreign ministry was never officially solicited by the four coastal Countries of Lake Chad to grant a loan aimed at carrying out a feasibility study of the Transaqua idea that could have open the way to subsequent sessions of donors.

Nowadays, distressed by what is considered a real biblical invasion of desperate populations, without hope for work and survival, many European politicians have discovered a new approach: “LET’S HELP THEM AT THEIR HOME”. Better late than never! The “megalomania” of which Transaqua has always been accused, today could be simply be considered the right approach to deal with the enormous problems of the African continent (and of the consequences that result and even more will result ... at “OUR HOME”!).

Could this situation be forecasted thirty years ago? Technicians such as myself and my numerous colleagues at that time, were neither soothsayers nor geniuses, but simple experts that traveled around Africa through the decades, from time to time requested to plan irrigation perimeters, roads, dams, large and small infrastructures of any kind, sometimes requested to recommend remedies to damages caused by serious natural phenomena, such as the great drought that in 1980 hit the Horn of Africa and many Sahel countries. We weren’t soothsayers or geniuses, we were used to compare the domestic productions and consumption of the country, the

imports/export data, the rate of demographic growth (especially!), the tribal and familiar structures and to draft solutions to future probable necessities on a sound basis for assessment.

Nothing special: only the habit of collecting data and informations, of programming and planning. Only “craft” and the knowledge of issues. And this methodology of work led us to foresee with great pessimism the future of the populations depending on Lake Chad. But we caught a glimpse of a great hope: there was a solution. Maybe. It only had to be checked.

Thus, the idea of Transaqua was born. An Idea that this speaker has tried to keep alive in these last decades, so that the efforts, the professionalism and the enthusiasm that have been spent many years ago by many professionals wouldn't be lost.

An “Idea” whose technical feasibility the member countries of the LCBC seem to intend to check now. Seemingly, they intend to see whether Transaqua could really become a second Nile in the heart of Africa, able to definitely solve the problem of Lake Chad.

This is the reason for my satisfaction: having transferred the interest to those who have the duty to decide alternative options.

I have always shared the alternative already envisioned by Bukar Shaib: if there is no courage to face the problem in all its real dimensions, the only scenario is to witness in the short term the advance of the desert as a result of nothing being done. And what should be done is nothing else than transferring an enormous quantity of water from the catchment basin of the Congo river to the basin of Lake Chad. And there are no alternatives to this hypothesis.

And the hypothesis can't be transferring a few hundreds cubic meters per second, but at least 1500/2000 cu.m/sec. And it isn't even possible to consider the hypothesis to pump water into the Lake as realistic, not only because equipments of this magnitude and power are unprecedented in the world, but essentially because the issue is revitalizing, and thus keeping the water level, of a real sea, which you cannot expect to achieve by pumping: an idea that, besides being “pharaonic”, would also be stupid.

The decision today is just political. Concerned African Countries, and only them, will be able to decide whether not to intervene and leave the Lake and the people living around it, to its natural destiny, or to proof the feasibility of Transaqua. If such a study were to confirm the feasibility of the idea, the consequent political decisions would be much more engaging, because they would give a start to a real and effective African renaissance.

Our hope is that any kind of solution today, after thirty and more years of guilty inactivity, is not entrusted only to arms and to more and more endemic warfare, nourished by the desperation of new generations.

**The great construction yard and the massive investments, that in the course of a few decades could directly and indirectly involve the labor force of a dozen of countries in Central Africa, would be able to employ tremendous local human resources for several generations of Africans, directing current immigration flows towards an enormous developing area that, from land of hunger and famine, could gradually transform itself in a series of large work sites and of wealth.**

The terrible doubt is: are we still in time?

Thank you for your attention

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