



Water security in the protracted crises and post-conflict reconstruction of the Middle East

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Key messages

- Water sector interventions in protracted crises and reconstruction need updated guidance that addresses the needs of the Middle East and North Africa's urban, middle-income, capable, and arid environments.
- More evidence is needed on how to coordinate and phase different modes of support to ensure sustainable, resilient and equitable water management and services.
- The role of water in supporting strategic reconstruction goals needs more attention and systematic treatment in reconstruction planning.
- More attention is needed on the political dimensions of water in protracted crises and reconstruction.
- Donors need more evidence and guidance on practices and modalities to support the water sector specifically.

Introduction

This background paper focuses on supporting sustainable, equitable and resilient water services over the short and long term during protracted crises and for post-crisis reconstruction in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

There are several evidence gaps on experiences and good practice for investing in water security in protracted crises and post-conflict reconstruction in MENA. Most literature assumes that humanitarian missions will operate in environments with limited infrastructure, technical and administrative capacity and where expectations of networked service delivery are low; by contrast, extensive infrastructure and complex arrangements for water management are common across MENA. Most collected evidence and emergency programme experience comes from the health and education sectors, not water services. Similarly, the post-conflict reconstruction literature emphasises security, justice, jobs, and the energy sector but excludes water resources. The role of water resources management in supporting strategic reconstruction goals such as economic growth and social reconstruction is similarly neglected. Where evidence does exist on water services and programmes, it is usually from water services in refugee camps and rural areas, not the urban contexts that dominate needs in MENA's current crises.

The evidence that does exist on urban drinking water and utilities tends to treat the challenges within a silo, with little attention to broader contexts of water resources management. Yet in MENA urban water services are strongly shaped by contextual factors. These include water-related risks, seasonal variations in water availability, competition over water resources between sectors and users, and institutional frameworks for water management. Donors and development actors attempting to deliver sustainable and resilient urban water services in such environments will face challenges in bridging humanitarian and development perspectives, situating urban water services in their broader context, and delivering programmes supportive of political settlements and peacebuilding.

This background paper draws on two sets of desk analyses and interviews conducted during 2017 with donors, water managers, and technical experts in the Middle East. The first focused on programme options for urban drinking water services during protracted crises; the second considered the interconnections between water security and peacebuilding in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria.

Findings

1. More evidence is needed on coordinating and phasing different modes of support to ensure sustainable and resilient urban drinking water services

The urban character of MENA's protracted crises is striking. In countries affected by conflict and their neighbours, towns and cities attract people seeking safety, services and employment. Even where conflict has not directly affected water supplies or distribution, urban drinking water systems have struggled to meet the corresponding surge in demand. Where infrastructure and services have been directly impacted by conflict, damage and destruction have left people in urban areas without access to safe drinking supplies.

The need for sustainable urban water supplies in MENA's protracted crises requires new collaborative approaches. Humanitarian organisations have stepped in across the region to provide emergency urban water services. Efforts have been made to adapt water supply, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) policies and instruments honed in camp and rural settings to the urban contexts of MENA's protracted crises. However, humanitarian agencies alone cannot meet needs for sustainable and resilient urban water services; new collaborative approaches are needed.

The lessons from different approaches to working with water utilities and authorities in protracted crises need synthesising. Development practice suggests water supply interventions should work with existing systems and strengthen institutions for the long term. In urban contexts, this means working with water utilities and national authorities who are the guarantors of sustainability; yet this implies a departure from humanitarian norms about respecting neutrality. One solution may be to phase in collaboration, with a transition from an initial emergency response led by humanitarian agencies to utility-led delivery as the crisis stabilises. Meanwhile, technical and institutional support from development agencies can complement humanitarian actions, and strengthen the effectiveness of utilities in leading medium- to long-term service delivery. Despite these lessons being known, the principles and experiences of working with water utilities across the region have yet to be synthesised into practical, operational guidance.

More evidence and guidance is needed on coordinating water interventions with the range of services and resources required to sustain them. Historically, humanitarian WASH programmes have tended to focus on access to services. However, the complex nature of urban water systems requires broader consideration of the resources needed to sustain them, such as energy, staff, and finance. These can be sources of tension between humanitarian and developmental approaches; humanitarian interventions usually distribute water for free, which can undermine the long-term financial sustainability of utilities. Coordinating with cash transfer

and social protection programmes can enable vulnerable people to pay for water while supporting financial sustainability, and thereby bridge developmental and humanitarian goals. However, more evidence is needed on how to operationalise and phase such approaches, as well as managing their limits and risks.

More guidance and effort is needed to strengthen the resilience of urban water systems in the region. The risks of repeated or emerging violence and disruption imply the importance of resilience. Even small improvements in general institutional strength can improve the resilience of service delivery systems. There is also scope for specific actions, such as developing crisis management plans to expand services in response to influxes of displaced people, and to maintain services should conflict resume. In Gaza, for example, the International Committee for the Red Cross has supported preparedness plans, pre-identified critical infrastructure, and stocked warehouses as a contingency measure. However, most water utilities in MENA lack such plans, or the guidance to help them prepare such plans.

2. Water resources need systematic treatment in preparations for reconstruction

Urban water services are a relatively small component of a complex and difficult water management picture. The current crises in MENA are taking place against a background of water stress. With institutions unable to meet competing demands for water from agriculture, industry, energy and for drinking water, chronic water stress contributes to sluggish economic growth and fragile governance (see Box 1). Unless it is deliberately oriented towards supporting water security, post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction is likely to recreate and reinforce these historic patterns of water stress. In the medium to long term, it is simply not feasible to plan the reconstruction of water-intensive sectors in isolation if they are to be sustainable and equitably balanced with the needs of other sectors and users.

Strengthening resilience by upgrading drought preparedness should be a priority. Preparedness for and

management of water related risks, particularly droughts, is another area that requires institutional and policy support. Most countries in MENA lack national drought management policies, anticipatory programmes, and response capacity. Yet extensive droughts in protracted crises can precipitate complex emergencies, as in Yemen during 2017. With climate change, droughts are growing in frequency and intensity across the region, and will be a persistent problem in coming decades. Complementary programmes to strengthen drought preparedness and resilience should be priorities both in emergency and reconstruction phases.

Strategic water resources assessments should be developed early to guide and inform reconstruction efforts. Donors have considerable experience in working with governments on shared sector strategies for reconstruction. There is, however, relatively little experience of ensuring coordination *between* sector strategies. There is also little experience of processes for legitimately developing water resources strategies *before* a reconstruction phase begins. Over \$70 billion was spent during the main reconstruction phase in Iraq between 2002 and 2008, including \$2.5 billion in the water sector. Yet water resource development and management plans drawn up in the 1960s and 1980s were not updated or revisited until 2008–09; the national water strategy was not finalised until 2015, and is still not publicly available. Sequencing and strategy is clearly an issue.

Evidence and guidance is needed on how to strengthen institutions for water resources management during protracted crisis and reconstruction. In Syria, national water management authorities are currently focused on emergency operations and management. Degraded human and institutional capacity to manage, plan and invest in infrastructure increases several risks during the reconstruction phase. These include corruption and the potential for uncoordinated investments in different sectors that undermine outcomes of equity, sustainability and resilience. However, there is little evidence or guidance on how to build institutional capacity during protracted crises, and before significant reconstruction investments are made.

Guidance is needed on the preparation and use of water resources assessments in planning for the reconstruction of individual sectors and areas. This would include the reliability of supplies, seasonal fluctuations, competition from other users and sectors, and supply risks from drought or dependence on transboundary water. They also need to be informed by the institutional framework for water management which governs how water supplies are allocated, how infrastructure investment decisions are made, and how risks and crises are dealt with. Outputs of investments are more likely to be effective and sustainable if aligned and coordinated with these institutions.

Reconstruction projects and programmes in different sectors need analysis to identify complementary actions that support strategic water security goals. Agricultural water use illustrates the trade-offs that should be

Box 1 Water management in pre-conflict Syria

Before the civil war, 87% of water was consumed in agriculture while urban drinking water rationing was commonplace, often just two hours a day in major cities during summer months. Irrigation was prioritised even over energy production, with hydroelectric generation far below the country's installed capacity. Basic services and the economy depended on complex coordination between 165 dams, extensive irrigated areas, and municipal supply systems. High dependency on transboundary waters from Turkey, vulnerability to drought, and competition for water resources stifled economic growth and exacerbated drought vulnerabilities.

acknowledged and managed in reconstruction. MENA countries use between 70 and 90% of their water in irrigation. Irrigation consumption can be unsustainable at local and national levels, and constrain the water available for drinking supplies and more productive economic uses. Yet rural areas are hotspots of marginalisation and poverty, and irrigation investments can stimulate the rural economy. Investments in agricultural reconstruction would benefit from guidance and a strategy balancing sectoral and strategic considerations.

3. More attention needs to be paid to the political dimensions of water in protracted crises and reconstruction

Water is an intrinsically political subject in MENA. Across the region, water management systems are typically non-inclusive, opaque, and framed in technical and bureaucratic terms that obscure political decisions. Yet high demand and low supply means that water is an intrinsically political subject. This politicisation of water is manifest at multiple scales. While disputes over transboundary waters are quite well explored, there is far less evidence or awareness about the role of water in the national political economy, or the role of water in fuelling local conflict.

Peacebuilding initiatives would benefit from analysis of how parties to armed conflict seek access to, and use control of, water resources. The negotiation of water allocation involves the distribution of resources both between competing groups (which relates directly to conflict reduction or mediation) and within competing groups (which involves a range of equity questions). Water resources are scarce, and access to or control over them may be an objective of and/or a political tool for conflicting groups. Water allocations and investments may therefore reflect emerging political settlements between and within different levels of political arrangements. Conversely, water investments may be hostage to changing political relationships with upstream parties. Crucially, these may include regional diplomatic relationships where transboundary resources are involved.

Tools and analysis are needed to understand the political and water security implications of investments in protracted crises and reconstruction. Political economy analysis is increasingly used in development practice to understand the politicisation of infrastructure investments and water allocations. However, there is little guidance on using political economy approaches to manage the politicisation of water allocations implicit in reconstruction investments. Decisions offering short-term peace-dividends may permit elite capture or exacerbate social mistrust over the long term. In fast-moving and complex political environments, donors and national authorities need tools and analysis to better understand the trade-offs involved.

More research and guidance is needed on the role of water governance in contributing to peacebuilding and socio-political reconstruction. Recent analysis¹ indicates that the collapse of economic organisation has cost the Syrian economy around 20 times more than losses in physical and human capital. In other words, social mistrust, degraded connectivity, and increased rent-seeking may be *invisible* damages, but addressing them will be critical to economic recovery and peacebuilding. This implies that reconstruction needs to go beyond rebuilding infrastructure and resettling displaced people. This is well recognised in the post-conflict literature on social reconstruction, strengthening the rule of law, and providing stable governance. However, there is less guidance on the role of water resources governance in contributing to social, institutional and political reconstruction and peacebuilding. In contexts where water is a highly political subject, and where water has been weaponised in conflict, such guidance is particularly needed.

4. Donors need more evidence and guidance on practices and modalities to support the water sector in protracted crises and reconstruction

There is significant general knowledge about how donors can best operate in situations of protracted conflict, but relatively little on the specifics of the water sector. Recent decades have seen a significant growth in experience, best-practice and development policy guidance for peacebuilding, statebuilding and aid to protracted crisis environments in general. Donors operating in protracted crises can now turn to significant volumes of research and guidance – often produced by their own research departments – to inform their general development programming.

At a strategic level, the relationship between donor interventions and political settlements, peacebuilding and statebuilding are now more clearly understood. Donors increasingly recognise the need to ‘do no harm’ in their interventions, and the value of doing the homework necessary to know what this would mean. At an operational level, the need for donors to consider using country systems, avoiding duplication of effort and working to support government capability and ‘hand back’ is increasingly clear. There are case studies, policy guidance and aid modality options that attempt to balance competing objectives in these areas. At a programme design level, the lessons learned from various reconstruction trust funds have been documented, and there is increasing consensus on how best to support the building of institutions in challenging contexts. Taken together, donors have a substantial *general* knowledge base to inform many elements of their aid programming in protracted crises. However, the specific lessons for the water sector itself are less clear.

1 World Bank (2017). *The Toll of War: the economic and social consequences of the war in Syria*. World Bank Group, Washington DC

There are specific knowledge gaps on working with and channelling funds to state-owned water companies and options for engaging with private sector water providers.

Much of the discussion on aid in protracted crises has focused on the ‘classic’ questions regarding if, how and to what degree central or local government financial systems can or should be used to handle donor funds. However, there is relatively little discussion of the implications, opportunities and risks of using the financial systems of arms-length, state-owned, but to some degree publicly accountable, water utility companies. Similarly, there is relatively little discussion in the literature about how, if and under what circumstances donors in protracted crises can or should work to support private sector water service providers. In contexts such as Syria, where private water supply is unregulated and illegal, there are questions about the long-term legitimacy and sustainability of such services.

Knowledge gaps remain on how donors working in protracted crises can reconcile fundamental differences between humanitarian and development approaches. Water services in particular require investment in emergency service delivery, ‘hard’ infrastructure *and* ‘soft’ institutions, often at different times as the events of protracted conflict and reconstruction unfold. As discussed above, this means donors need to design aid programmes that can flexibly deploy different and complementary interventions under a long-term orientation for the water sector. However, questions remain about how the operational siloes between humanitarian and development assistance might be reduced by reform of donor practices – e.g. financial modalities, reporting systems, and risk management – and how to resolve deep-rooted normative differences between humanitarian and development perspectives. While specific recommendations to bridge the siloes between humanitarian and development systems are emerging, more evidence is needed to bolster these recommendations.

There is scope for making more effective use of existing knowledge. Numerous studies have already reviewed the performance of different types of multi-donor infrastructure reconstruction funds in various post-conflict contexts. The specific lessons for the water sector learned by different infrastructure trust funds in similar environments could usefully be brought together. There is an opportunity therefore to both synthesise general best practice in how to manage this kind of financing tool and to draw out specific lessons for the water sector.

Conclusions and next steps

There has been much discussion, in recent years, on addressing the divide between the humanitarian and development systems.² This background paper highlights some of the means of advancing this agenda; using a

sectoral lens, examining the relationships between clients, actors, issues, interventions and donor modalities over the short and long term, and identifying development actions to complement humanitarian interventions and strengthen institutions for long-term sustainability and resilience.

Responses to the current protracted crises in MENA need an evidence base on how to support water security in middle-income, urban, and water-stressed environments. Much of this evidence can be drawn from research, evaluations, and syntheses of former cases of humanitarian interventions and reconstruction.

Evidence is needed on the mixtures of technical, institutional and policy interventions required to best meet urban drinking water demand in protracted crises. Strategies need to take account of existing institutions and infrastructure, the changing nature of urban conflict, and engage with the broader context of water resources and risk management outside of the ‘urban water sector’.

Similarly, guidance is needed on how to develop a water resources strategy for a country in protracted crisis, and how to coordinate between reconstruction investments in water-intensive sectors. Reducing agricultural water demand while supporting rural jobs and building drought resilience will be key to both economic growth and sustaining urban water services. Meanwhile, the potential role of water sharing and governance in political and social reconstruction at both local and country levels needs more research.

Bridging the humanitarian-development divide, the siloes of urban water services and the broader water sector, and the gaps between the water and other sectors is a challenging proposition. It raises the need to identify modalities that enable complex, multi-sector work by multiple partners, in challenging and dynamic political and security environments, and that are oriented towards long-term goals.

This research suggests:

- Water sector interventions in protracted crises and reconstruction need updated guidance that addresses the needs of the Middle East and North Africa’s urban, middle-income, capable, and arid environments.
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- The role of water in supporting strategic reconstruction goals needs more attention and systematic treatment in reconstruction planning.
- More attention is needed on the political dimensions of water in protracted crises and reconstruction.
- Donors need more evidence and guidance on practices and modalities to support the water sector specifically.

2 e.g.: Mason, N. and Mosello, B. (2016). *Making humanitarian and development WASH systems work better together*. Overseas Development Institute, London.

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