

Water as a Tool for Defusing Socio-Political Tension

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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OVERVIEW

The interaction of political tension and conflict on one hand, and water scarcity and stress on the other, is well documented. In Lebanon, political, personal, and sectarian tensions can exacerbate water-related conflict, and water stress and mismanagement can feed into further political and sectarian strife.

However, water projects can also build social cohesion and transcend enmity. UNICEF and local partner LebRelief experienced this in North Lebanon where the rehabilitation of a well in a split sectarian community led to increased community dialogue and a reduction in tension. As a result, an army post was removed, making it easier for children to walk to school. Since then, UNICEF has piloted several other projects to build horizontal social cohesion by leveraging the need for improved WASH services and rebuilding trust between sectarian groups and neighborhoods. UNICEF also supports vertical social cohesion between the water establishments

and local population by improving the WASH infrastructure, accountability mechanisms and the communications between service providers and communities.

Building on this to further understand how water can be a tool for defusing socio-political tension, AUB’s Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (AUB-IFI) and Search for Common Ground (Search), with support from UNICEF, sought to identify hotspots in Lebanon with high water-related stress (in terms of quality and access). Water-related conflict risk, community-level resilience factors, points of division, key influencers, possible champions, and social connectors were also identified. These sources of information were collected in order to propose and prioritize action through water and/or wastewater projects, and maximize projects’ potential for peacebuilding and social impact to mitigate future risks and reduce tensions, all in the context of climate change.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve this, AUB-IFI first conducted a mapping exercise that identified conflict hotspots and target communities for project implementation.

The mapping exercise included the collation of conflict risk factors which include: socio-economic indicators, water and environment

indicators, and socio-political and water-related conflict indicators. Socio-economic variables included: poverty indices, population growth, livelihood diversity, and food security indices. Water and environmental indicators included various measures of water availability, water quality, water supply network coverage, and wastewater. Temperature, precipitation, and seasonality change along with history of natural disasters made up the climate and natural disaster sub-indicators. Finally, tension indicators were derived from findings of UNDP's social tensions perception surveys, disaggregated by district, and water conflict events recorded within the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) database. These spatial indicators were used to extrapolate a composite water-related conflict risk score for each district. The cazas of **Baalbek and West Bekaa** were identified as the target hotspots, scoring high across all three indicators. Once these hotspots were identified, root tensions were analyzed and key stakeholder interactions within the districts were mapped. A survey was designed to explore the typology and drivers of water-related tensions in the two cazas and explore the interactions and roles of key stakeholders in water and conflict management through a social network analysis (SNA). The SNA explored themes of conflict resolution, knowledge exchange, water supply, quality, network maintenance, compliance, and disaster risk reduction, water project funding, and key players in potential peacebuilding projects. A questionnaire was developed and addressed to local authorities including Unions of Municipalities (UoMs), Governors and Qa'im Maqam (district commissioners), as well as regional and national water authorities, and local and international NGOs and IGOs.

KEY FINDINGS

A total of 26 institutional stakeholders across both Baalbek and West Bekaa surveyed by AUB-IFI identified water pollution and scarcity as the most common water issues in the region, along with unfair distribution of resources; fuel and electricity shortages; and poor infrastructure. These issues were echoed by community participants across all locations consulted by Search. Frequent electrical outages and shortages were cited in every community and many individuals across West Bekaa and Baalbek ranked reliable energy as the highest priority water issue facing their

Alongside the surveying of institutional actors and stakeholders, 19 focus group discussions (FGDs) with 143 community members were conducted across Baalbek and West Bekaa. These sessions were broken into two rounds, and determined if residents of the cazas were in agreement with key stakeholders' perceptions. Direct consultation with community members who may eventually benefit from water and/or wastewater projects provided critical information for the design of conflict-sensitive and inclusive program recommendations. Questions in the first round of FGDs were modeled on AUB-IFI's SNA survey, and the second round questionnaire was based on both AUB-IFI's preliminary SNA findings and identified needs related to implementing water-related projects. Specific consideration was given to the following topics: available water sources, water-related problems and conflicts, key relevant actors, barriers to water-related conflict resolution, project possibilities, personal engagement and institutional trust, collaboration, past water-related projects, and communication practices.

The first round of FGDs targeted community members from locations identified as the most vulnerable to water-related conflicts by AUB-IFI, and included: Deir El Ahmar, Iaat, Yammouneh, Dar el Ouassa, Jenta, Yahfoufa, Qaa Baalbek, Chlifa, Aarsal, and Bouday in Baalbek, and Haouch el Harime, Khiara, and Ghazze in West Bekaa. In the second round of FGDs, participants were drawn from: Aarsal, Ras Baalbek, Serraine el Tahta, Seraaine el Fauqa, Nabi Chit, Youmine, Douris, Fakeha, and Zeitouneh in Baalbek, and Haouch el Harime, Ghazze, Mansoura, Loucy, Jebb Jannine, and Kamed el Laouz in West Bekaa.

communities. At the community level, the second most agreed upon problems identified by FGD participants were low quality water and frequent water contamination.

Around 60% of institutional stakeholders indicated these issues could lead to water-related conflict, with the most common drivers being disputes over access or ownership of water sources; poor planning or targeting of aid and development; the prevailing socio-economic conditions; and political interference.

The latter two were also identified as common barriers to conflict resolution, in addition to inadequate conflict resolution frameworks, lack of participatory approaches, and lack of funding. Again, community members echoed these sentiments, and pointed to specific instances where issues had already caused direct conflict. The most common issues identified related to competing demands for limited resources, particularly between Lebanese nationals and Syrian refugees. As a result of specific conflicts, damage to water infrastructure, physical violence, and restriction of others' access to water supplies occurred.

Findings from the SNA and FGDs highlighted the key actors across themes and aspects of conflict resolution and water management. Municipalities were identified as major players that are most frequently contacted for conflict resolution, especially when it comes to water-related conflict. Local mayors, in particular, were engaged by community members across all FGD participant communities. Particularly high levels of trust in local municipalities were found in Ghazze and Ras Baalbek, where residents felt their leaders could implement water-related solutions to conflicts and problems. Participants from Haouch el Harime, Aarsal, and women from across West Bekaa also mentioned the importance of their municipalities as key actors for water-related projects, even if they did not fully trust them.

Important families, local religious authorities and political groups also appear to have a large stake in existing conflict resolution networks, though trust in these actors varied from community to community. In Serraine el Fauqa, Serraine el Tahta, and Nabi Chit, participants cited regular reliance on religious authorities for help with peaceful solutions and reconciliation, and in Ghazze, Haouch el Harime, Aarsal, Youmine, and Douris, participants felt religious actors could contribute meaningfully to water-related resolutions. In contrast, a majority of FGD participants stated they had lost all trust in all of Lebanon's public institutions and the government itself. Only in Khiara did FGD participants believe the government had a valuable role to play in conflict resolution.

The influence of international NGOs and IGOs such as UNICEF, EU and UNDP exists prominently

in conflict resolution networks as well, however it is overtaken by local NGOs and regional and national authorities when it comes to water conflicts. While community members weren't aware of specific instances where these actors had engaged in conflict resolution in the past, participants trusted the work and leadership of IGOs and local NGOs beyond all other actors. Residents tended to prefer that such organizations take lead roles in implementing conflict resolution projects in their communities, and stated that organizations had both villages' best interests in mind and the financial capacity to achieve results. Specifically, FGD participants held the most trust in the UNDP, UNICEF, and the Red Cross. During the SNA, key players that emerged as potential actors in water-based peacebuilding projects included a diversity of overlapping local and international stakeholders, including: municipalities, the Ministry of Electricity and Water (MoEW), BWE, UNICEF and USAID.

The knowledge exchange network is concentrated within larger regional authorities (Governorate and BWE) and large NGOs such as UNICEF, Oxfam, UNDP and SDC. Municipalities and local NGOs shown to be big players in conflict resolution do not seem to benefit as prominently from the knowledge, information or technical exchange of this network. The prevalence of international NGOs is also seen in the water supply, water quality, network maintenance and natural disaster risk management network, which could be attributed to their work supporting infrastructure development. However, municipalities and BWE display a high betweenness centrality in this network, indicating their high connectedness and influence within this network. Unsurprisingly, large international NGOs and IGOs are the most influential in water project funding networks, and are most connected to regional authorities such as Governorates, and to their local NGO partners.

Conversely, community members have little to no influence or engagement with knowledge exchange networks, meaning the varying degrees of local response initiatives and community development projects are rarely known outside of residents who directly participate in them. Participants in every village, excluding Khiara, stated community-level efforts were not sustainable, and did not address the full scope of their communities' needs, although they did occasionally resolve individual points of tension.

PROJECT RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on findings from the SNA, FGDs, and initial conflict analysis, AUB-IFI and Search jointly propose the following actions for implementing conflict-sensitive water projects with peacebuilding components. While increased partnership between institutions and communities is broadly recommended, separate water-related projects applicable at institutional and community levels in Baalbek and West Bekaa are provided. These interventions are suitable for upscaling to other vulnerable localities.

- **Introduce or integrate renewable energy sources to meet the energy needs of water infrastructure.** Stable, sustainable sources of energy would decrease recurring costs and reliance on volatile fuel prices when operating pumping stations, wastewater treatment facilities, and more. Energy independent water infrastructure has the potential to address current needs and mitigate future tensions.
- **Rehabilitate, redesign, and invest in wastewater treatment facilities and networks to ensure their optimal operation.** Existing wastewater treatment facilities should be revisited and evaluated, with investment directed towards maintenance and increased capacities. Wastewater networks could also be improved by designing local, municipality-managed septic tanks that do not require pumping.
- **Introduce bulk metering and district metering into existing water supply networks.** Meter-collected data would enable better water accounting at the source and help ensure equitable distribution of water resources to different areas. Additionally, meters would help detect leaks or unauthorized connections in the network. Meter data should be made available through a publicly accessible platform or database to promote transparency and the participation of concerned communities and stakeholders.
- **Introduce and invest in gated, automated hydrant systems for irrigation water supplies.** Automated systems would distribute set quotas of water through the existing water network directly to the point of use. This process would be useful for irrigation, cost reduction of secondary water supplies, equitable access improvements, and reduced competition and conflict between private water providers.
- **Strengthen the agency, efficacy, and expertise of community members and utilize their support in the design, operation and maintenance infrastructure projects.** A civilian structure that consolidates public sentiment and empowers community members could foster social stability and contribute to sustainable water-related solutions. Water Management Committees (WMCs) could fill this role and channel the local knowledge of trusted residents, business owners, tradespeople, and more into technical projects and conflict resolution.
- **Establish formal, public consultation processes for drafting plans, regulations, and laws in the WASH sector and adopt mechanisms that allow for the participation of interested stakeholders.** Before initiating WASH development projects or regulation changes, public fora and town halls would facilitate dialogue between stakeholders and target communities, and build consensus. With the assistance of WMCs, NGOs, IGOs and other implementing partners can mainstream public consultations to make interventions more inclusive, conflict sensitive, and transparent.
- **Support the conflict resolution capacities of local authorities and community members.** While some actors have played a central role in addressing water-related conflicts in the past, comprehensive capacity development is needed at all levels of Lebanese society. Specific sessions and support mechanisms are recommended for the following topics: transparency, non-violent communication, non-adversarial advocacy, participatory governance, gender sensitivity, and project management.

- **Improve water management oversight and transparency mechanisms within local and regional authorities.** Oversight can be supported by strengthening the national Central Inspection's role in municipalities and RWEs, or by establishing a decentralized commission. Inspection units must have the mandate and ability to: supervise, investigate, and audit municipal operations, advise on municipal decisions and processes, and coordinate with regional and national authorities.
- **Strengthen oversight for drilling wells and improve permit authorization processes.** The MoEW should be supported in permit authorization by an intermediary body. RWEs could fill this role and use regional insight to investigate drilling plans, recommend alternative water sources, or confirm the need for well drilling. The permit-seeking and well authorization processes could be decentralized through this change.
- **Train grassroots-level mediators to address persistent and emergent tensions alongside infrastructure projects.** Supporting localized mediation efforts could further enable communities' engagement in peacebuilding around water-related issues. By identifying individuals within the many representative demographics of targeted locations and training them as grassroots-level mediators, infrastructure projects can more effectively respond to conflict dynamics. Youth are prime candidates for this role.
- **Mainstream and include women in program decision-making and implementation.** Despite regular engagement with water-related issues, women are often excluded from relevant decision-making processes. Education for Lebanon's institutions can mainstream women's inclusion, and WMCs serve as an immediate opportunity for the direct participation of women trusted by their own communities.
- **Foster long-term sustainability by including youth in water-related programs.** Because youth will take on any and all water-related issues in time, it is important to build their confidence and capacities. Including youth can transform traditional intercommunal relations, and seed long-term change through increased knowledge and capacities around conflict dynamics, decision making, and civic engagement.
- **Create mechanisms for municipalities, RWEs, and communities to share their knowledge, experience, successes, and mitigation strategies with one another.** Local-level town hall meetings and institutional experience-sharing exchanges throughout the region and the Global South could help all levels of Lebanese society share water management solutions and strengthen peacebuilding networks.
- **Support small scale investments in water saving fixtures to optimize water consumption and savings.** Ensuring businesses, especially within rural trades and service industries, have access to water in periods of scarcity can safeguard local livelihoods. Water saving faucets, pressure reducing valves, recirculating hot-water systems, and rainwater harvesting systems can all help conserve water and supplement primary supplies. Installation and education efforts for new fixtures could be conducted by WMCs.