

Transboundary Water Cooperation in MENA

Cooperation around shared water resources has the potential to promote trust between countries and be an instrument for larger cooperation. This is highly important to the countries in the MENA region where water scarcity and conflicts are a threat to enhanced well-being. Sweden supports efforts to improve regional cooperation in MENA in order to achieve sustainable, equitable and efficient use of water.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is considered the most water-scarce region of the world. It is estimated that over 60 million people lack access to drinking water and over 70 million people lack access to adequate sanitation in the MENA region. The water resources are often shared between two or more nations, and there is a heavy reliance on groundwater resources. Climate change will act as a multiplier of already existing stresses and further affect water availability and quality.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Due to the high water interdependence between MENA countries, regional water cooperation is a requirement for human and economic development and constitutes an important basis for trust building. Water cooperation can be an instrument to deepen regional integration, promote peace and security, and to enhance resilience. Management and use of water resources is at the core of sustainable development in the MENA region. However, after many years of political tensions and acute disputes (including violence) between and within countries, regional cooperation needs to be developed and improved.

The large population growth, high urbanisation rate and national development activities lead to increased water demand. One of the greatest challenges is to provide enough water to sustain the food demands from a fast-growing population. Water scarcity results in higher food

prices and food access can become grave concerns for many, especially for rural communities, farmers, the poor and/or internally displaced groups.



Low water levels in the Ziglab Water Reservoir due to years of drought. Photo: Muna Barghouth/Sida

Demand-side measures must complement supply-side activities for sustainable water management. Opportunities to improve water efficiency in the MENA region include, for instance, reallocation of water and introducing policy instruments such as joint quantity controls (i.e. standards, bans, permits and quotas); market based interventions (e.g. taxes, user fees, subsidies); market creation (tradable rights and permits); and technology (e.g. desalination, recycling, leakage protection) together with public engagement (information and conservation campaigns).

SWEDEN'S ENGAGEMENT

Swedish support to transboundary cooperation on water in the MENA region is primarily focusing on the areas around the River Jordan and the Euphrates-Tigris. Support aimed at improving skills in water governance, Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) and climate change adaptation, covering the entire MENA region, is granted by providing capacity support to regional organisations and networks of water professionals, water users and service providers. Poverty reduction, equality and equity are key features of Swedish support. The current annual Swedish support to transboundary water management in MENA is on average SEK 75 million.

Examples of Swedish support to transboundary water resources

GOOD WATER NEIGHBOURS

The *Good Water Neighbours* (GWN) project is implemented by EcoPeace Middle East. GWN aims to promote peace through eco-education, awareness raising, and cross-border dialogue in 28 communities sharing common water sources, in Jordan, Israel and Palestine. GWN operates in a conflict area where all types of exchange (information, communication, travelling, etc.) is difficult and the distrust between different groups and nationalities is large.

The focus on water – a single issue that is common to all – has helped the participants to overcome the language barriers, the different cultures, religious beliefs, and even differences of political opinions. The project has created and sustained cross-border cooperation on water issues, resulting in more positive attitudes towards the neighbours and the breaking down of stereotypes and prejudices. Furthermore, GWN has contributed to livelihood benefits, for instance through improvements in water and sewage infrastructures, employment opportunities, and sustainable agricultural technologies.



The confluence of the Jordan River and Dead Sea. Photo: Muna Barghouth/Sida

CLIMATE CHANGE MODELLING AND VULNERABILITY ASSESSMENT

The MENA region is very vulnerable to climate change, and particularly freshwater resources are at risk. Sida supports the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in assessing the impact of climate change on freshwater resources in the region, including identification of socio-economic and environmental vulnerabilities and a risk analysis of extreme weather events. A regional climate change model and vulnerability assessment is being elaborated and will be presented to the environmental and water ministers of the League of Arab States (LAS) to facilitate coordinated responses. The

Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute (SMHI) plays an instrumental role in developing the regional climate change model. A common platform is being established, for addressing and responding to climate change impacts on freshwater resources in the region by serving as the basis for dialogue, priority setting and policy formulation on climate change adaptation at the regional level.

INTERNATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMMES

Two of Sida's advanced international training programmes (ITP) are tailor made for participants from the MENA region. Each ITP provides capacity development support to 25 participants annually, on i) integrated, sustainable coastal development, and ii) climate change mitigation and adaptation. The training programmes aim at strengthening capacity at individual as well as at institutional levels, and to help build professional networks.

BLUE PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Conflicts and peace are not about water alone. However, declining water availability and quality has an impact on human wellbeing and, as a consequence, on social stability, internal strife, and transboundary conflicts in the Middle East. The Blue Peace framework developed by the Strategic Foresight Group (SFG), is about transforming water from a potential source of crisis into a potential instrument for cooperation and peace, through concrete actions. Together with Switzerland, Sweden provides support to SFG towards these objectives, as well as to share experiences in the region.

These actions build upon the recommendations of the report "The Blue Peace – Rethinking Middle East Water". The project aims at creating a process of interaction between political leaders in the Middle East and representatives of transboundary water cooperation institutions in other parts of the world with a view to enhance appreciation of regional cooperation architecture in countries in the Middle East.

Policy direction – water and sanitation

Sweden promotes efficient, fair and sustainable management of water and sanitation. Sida's interventions are directed by results strategies at country, regional and global levels.