

Cooperation around shared water resources has the potential to promote trust between countries and to be an instrument for larger cooperation. This is highly important for the countries in the Middle East and North Africa (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, fair and efficient use of water. The MENA region is considered the most water-scarce region in the world. It is estimated that currently over 60 million people lack access to drinking water and over 70 million people lack access to adequate sanitation in the 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 the 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 tension and acute disputes between and within countries, regional cooperation needs to be developed and improved.

Climate change, unequal distribution of water, high urbanisation rates and national development activities have led 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, and people in poverty or internally displaced groups.

Extracting, delivering and disposing water require energy, and similarly, many processes for extracting and refining various fuel sources and producing electricity use water.

The water, energy and food nexus means that the three sectors — water security, energy security and food security — are inextricably linked and that actions in one area often can impact on one or both of the other sectors.

This is of highest importance in the MENA region. Demand-side measures must complement supply-side activities for sustainable water management.

Opportunities to improve water efficiency in the MENA region include reallocation of water, wastewater collection and water policy instruments.



Declining water levels in the Dead Sea Photo: Yosra Albakkar

SWEDEN'S ENGAGEMENT

Swedish engagement via Sida's support to organizations working with transboundary cooperation on water in the MENA region has mainly focused on the areas around the Jordan River and the Euphrates and Tigris river systems.

Sida's support aims at improving skills in water governance, Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) and climate change adaptation, covering the entire MENA region, and is provided through capacity support to regional organisations and networks of water professionals, water users and service providers. Poverty reduction, equality and justice aspects are key features of the Swedish support. The annual support from Sida to the environmental sector, including transboundary water management in the MENA region is currently approximately 110 million SEK.

Examples of Sida's 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 is difficult and the distrust between different groups and nationalities is extensive. The focus on water - a single issue that is a common concern 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.

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 are 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.

APPLYING A NEXUS APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

With support from Sida, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) is implementing the initiative on the 2030 Agenda for Water efficiency/productivity and Water Sustainability in the MENA Countries. In this intervention, FAO aims to empower MENA countries to: (i) develop scenario analysis of development trajectories, adopting a

Water-Food-Energy-Climate Nexus analytical framework, to serve for policies and strategies revisions towards 'water sustainability, higher food security and more climate-resilient systems; and ii) implement measures to achieve the 2030 water-related sustainable development agenda.

WATER AND 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, social stability, internal strife and transboundary conflicts in the Middle East.

The Blue Peace framework that was developed by the Strategic Foresight Group (SFG) argued for transforming water from a potential source of crisis into a potential instrument for cooperation and peace, through concrete actions. Similar approaches are replicated in The Collaborative Project on Euphrates and Tigris, implemented by the International Centre for Biosaline Agriculture, where a process of interaction between decision-makers in the Middle East and representatives of transboundary water cooperation institutions in other parts of the world is created, with the purpose to enhance appreciation of regional cooperation architecture in countries in the Middle East.

Sida also recognises that governance and financing are fundamental building blocks in building peace and sustainable water resources. Sida supports initiatives in these areas through several partners among those, Global Water Partnership Mediterranean (GWP-Med) and Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI).



King Talal Dam, Jordan

Photo: Yosra Albakkar

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.