

The role of NGOs and the academic community in promoting regional cooperation over water issues: Successes and limitations

Twite R.

in

Hamdy A. (ed.), Monti R. (ed.).
Food security under water scarcity in the Middle East: Problems and solutions

Bari : CIHEAM

Options Méditerranéennes : Série A. Séminaires Méditerranéens; n. 65

2005

pages 147-152

Article available on line / Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

<http://om.ciheam.org/article.php?IDPDF=5002207>

To cite this article / Pour citer cet article

Twite R. **The role of NGOs and the academic community in promoting regional cooperation over water issues: Successes and limitations.** In : Hamdy A. (ed.), Monti R. (ed.). *Food security under water scarcity in the Middle East: Problems and solutions.* Bari : CIHEAM, 2005. p. 147-152 (Options Méditerranéennes : Série A. Séminaires Méditerranéens; n. 65)



<http://www.ciheam.org/>
<http://om.ciheam.org/>

THE ROLE OF NGOS AND THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY IN PROMOTING REGIONAL COOPERATION OVER WATER ISSUES: SUCCESSES AND LIMITATIONS

R. Twite*

* Israel Palestine Centre for Research and Information, Jerusalem, Israel.

E-mail: robin@ipcric.org

SUMMARY – The question of how best to share the limited water resources of the region was given substantial attention in the Oslo Accords. Structures were established to promote day-to-day cooperation, most notably the Joint Water Committee. An effort was also made to engage the international community in helping to resolve the problem by means of the multilateral initiative on water. Both these still function, in contrast to other institutional frameworks established under Oslo, but both have their limitations. Non-governmental agencies which work with Israelis and Palestinians and university based research projects which include experts from both communities, can provide alternative means of communication, are flexible and can promote serious research initiatives. The work of the Israel Palestine Centre for Research and Information in bringing together experts, officials and academics as well as major donors, is a good example of what NGOs can do. Its most recent manifestation was in October when IPCRI, with the support of USAID and UNESCO, organized a four day conference which was attended by about 120 participants from the region and about 50 from USA and Europe. The value of such activities is evident particularly in a time of acute conflict when official channels are restricted and confrontational. A second active NGO is Friends of the Earth Middle East which has managed to keep alive a useful project designed to promote community awareness about water use in rural communities in Israel and Palestine and to work seriously on the problem of the future of the Dead Sea. Besides these NGO efforts, significant work has been done by various university departments from Israel and Palestine working in collaboration, often with third parties from Europe and North America. Among the larger of these currently in operation are the GLOWA project which has teams from Israel, Palestine and Jordan working on the long term effects of global warming on the Jordan Basin and the 12 year old joint project on water technology, both of which are financed by the German Government. All these efforts have helped to build up a “water community” of experts, academics and officials, member of which work together in spite of the political situation. But their efforts are limited by the acuteness of the current conflict and especially by the fact that deep divisions remain over the question of water rights which can be alleviated, but not resolved, by such things as the working of the Joint Water Committee on practical supply issues and the provision of additional fresh water by desalination, or the inter-action between organizations and individuals such as that which took place at the IPCRI Conference in October. A more innovative approach is needed – among the ideas currently circulating are the creation of a Company which would manage the water resources of Israel and Palestine as a whole, the creation of an Israeli and Palestinian Water Council which will represent major stakeholders and function as an advisory body, and a widening of the role of the Joint Water Committee. The international community also needs to be more involved. There is much work to be done.

Keywords: NGO, research, conflict

INTRODUCTION – THE NATURE OF THE GAP BETWEEN ISRAELI AND PALESTINIAN POSITIONS OVER WATER

There is currently a great deal of discussion about how civil society can help to resolve conflict over the equitable distribution of water in cases where the physical control over the water basin is divided between different political entities. Recently Green Cross International published a helpful brochure entitled “Water for Peace” in which it reviewed the current situation in certain key geographical areas and looked at ways in which societies in conflict can use debate over water issues not to promote increasing confrontation but to promote peace. The Israel Palestine Centre for Research and Information has been working for over a decade to do just this and this paper is

designed to review the work of IPCRI and that of other NGOs and academic institutions which have aimed to promote peace by bringing together individuals and institutions from Israel and Palestine to work together in a variety of different contexts. In doing so reference will be made to the background against which NGOs and academic institutions work, and the benefits and limitations of what they do. The role of the international community will also be looked at.

There is no need to describe in any detail the significance of the water issue in Israel and in the Palestinian Authority Areas. It is evident that in a region where water resources are limited and which, according to all international norms is rated as an area under stress in relation to water, the question of how best to share limited resources is bound to be a significant one. The Oslo Accords gave attention to questions relating to the control and distribution of water supply in the region. Structures were established to promote day-to-day cooperation, most notably the Joint Water Committee chaired by senior officials from Israel and the Palestinian Authority backed by their professional staff.

An effort was also made to engage the international community in helping to resolve the problem. Among the topics upon which the multilateral talks focused, water was included alongside other key issues such as economic cooperation, the future of refugees, and the environment. Both the Joint Water Committee and the Multilateral Initiative still function, in contrast to other institutional frameworks established under Oslo, but both have their limitations.

The Joint Water Committee has dealt in its meetings primarily with practical problems related to water supply – the Palestinians have been required to get the approval of the Committee for new initiatives while Israel has heard from Palestinian participants of problems relating to water supply and distribution. Action has resulted from the meetings but by their nature they are not able to deal fully with the question of water rights or long term and complex issues such as the amount of water to be allocated to agriculture.

The Multilateral initiative has survived and undertaken some useful work (as the multilaterals are to be subject of separate paper at this conference the nature of this work will not be dealt with here). But it appears to be the case that the multilateral initiative has remained in existence partly because it has largely eschewed political related issues and dealt with questions relating to information distribution and training which are largely non-confrontational.

In spite of the work of the Joint Water Committee and the multilateral initiative, relations between Israelis and Palestinians over water issues are still not properly resolved. Both sides cherish complaints against the other. A prime source of resentment among Palestinians is the relatively small amount of water per capita they receive in comparison with that given to Israelis. They further claim that this imbalance results in part from the way in which Israel controls extraction from the mountain aquifer which runs under both Israel and the West Bank. The fact that the various Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza receive fresh water equal per capita to that in Israel proper, while their neighbours receive so little, adds fuel to the fire.

In the Jordan valley there are also very divisive issues. The Palestinians feel they have been deliberately excluded from discussion about the future of the Dead Sea. Certainly the 1994 agreement between Israel and Jordan (for the two principals a very helpful agreement) makes no mention of the involvement of Palestinians with the Jordan basin. At a meeting held in Jordan in 2003 organized by Friends of the Earth Middle East to discuss the future of the Dead Sea it was notable how little space was given to Palestinian claims to a voice in the matter by official speakers from Israel and Jordan. This is unacceptable to Palestinians, given that a large part of the catchment area of the Jordan is in the West Bank and the historic Palestinian town of Jericho is the biggest community adjacent to the Dead Sea.

For their part Israeli officials feel that their efforts to maintain water supply to Palestinian communities are not appreciated. They feel that the Government of Israel has fulfilled its obligations initially as an occupying power and point to the fact that the actual amount of water supplied to the West Bank has risen by 20 percent since 1967. They claim that they have worked as a partner with the Palestinian Authority, as set out in the Oslo agreements. They further criticize the failure of the Palestinian Water Authority and the Palestinian Authority as a whole, to treat waste water effectively, and claim that untreated waste water flowing into streams and wadis constitutes a threat to the quality of the water of the region's aquifers.

It seems that part of the failure to deal with these mutual resentments lies fundamentally in the different perspectives of the two parties. The Israeli Water Commissioner and his colleagues preside over a sophisticated national water system which has at its disposal a wealth of hydrological information, technical and managerial experience and high standing in the country. Funding is available and routinely available as part of the national budget. Israel is recognized as a world leader in the use of water for irrigation and other technical areas. Of course the Water Commissioner has his problems within government, the negative attitudes of the finance ministry to investment in water infrastructure, the strength of the agricultural lobby which maintains artificially low prices for water supplied to farmers, disputes over charges with local authorities, but he is to a large extent master in his own house. By contrast the head of the Palestinian Water Authority has to deal with a situation in which his authority over large parts of the West Bank is limited or non-existent either because of the fact that his writ does not run in those areas still under Israeli control or because of the administrative weakness of the Palestinian Authority itself. Though he has some excellent professional staff and access to most of the data he needs (there are still disputes about whether or not Israel releases all the data it has but these are less strident that they were a decade ago), he must struggle for his authority with other Palestinian Ministries and look for funding for new initiatives. He does not have adequate funding provided out the tax base of the Authority but has to look to international donors who have to be negotiated with and kept happy. Relations with donors must form an important element in his thinking. He has also to recognize that it is an Israeli company which manages much of the water infrastructure in the West Bank and that he and his office are in a state of dependence on Israel. It is not easy to maintain morale in these circumstances.

Their superior situation and negotiating position affects the attitudes of the staff of the Israeli Commission and other Israeli institutions. Individual officials are, it seems, genuine in their wish to see the Palestinians receive adequate water of an acceptable quality. They devote time and thought to the matter. But in the last resort they feel they know best and perhaps in some cases they do. This sense of being better informed, better able to decide, can lead to awkward situations. At the recent conference on water issues in Israel and Palestine (referred to later) organized by IPCRI the chief planner at the Water Commission during his speech announced that the Israeli authorities intended to allocate up to 15 million cubic meters of water from its large new desalination plant in Ashkelon to the Palestinian Authority in Gaza and that in the long term there were plans to build a special desalination plant especially to serve the needs of the northern West Bank on the Mediterranean Sea near the town of Hadera. He was disagreeably surprised when Palestinian members of his audience responded not with praise for this initiative but with critical questions as to why Israel did not give the Palestinians their full share of the fresh water from the mountain aquifer (and presumably keep the desalinated water for itself).

The imbalance of power between Israel and the Palestinians adversely affects cooperation and causes the Israelis to look at times over confident and patronizing.

On the other hand the knowledge of their own weakness can lead the Palestinian officials to sound over critical even when they are fully aware that there are political difficulties which the Israeli Water Commissioner cannot overcome even if he wished to do so. For example the supply of ample amounts of good quality water to settlements while nearby Palestinians communities are suffering shortage or drinking water of poor quality, is not a matter about which the Israeli Water Commissioner can do anything in the present political climate. Continuous complaint, even when justified, can sound repetitive and by serving to irritate rather than convince, have an adverse effect on the quality of cooperation.

Both sides are caught by the desperate logic of the political conflict and cannot easily escape from it.

CAN ACTION BY NGOS AND ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS HELP?

It is in this situation that Non-Governmental Organizations and academic institutions supporting research projects which include experts from both communities can provide potential for hope. Such alternative means of communication can enable the two sides to meet on more equitable terms. They are more flexible. In addition they can offer third parties a way to contribute to the resolution of difficulties without directly involving themselves in the political process.

NGOs which are controlled jointly by Israelis and Palestinians are perhaps particularly helpful in this respect. The work of the Israel Palestine Centre for Research and Information (IPCRI) is relevant here. Over the last ten years IPCRI has sought to bring together experts, officials and academics as well as major donors, to look at various aspects of water management, from both a technical and a social point of view. Seminars were held on waste water use, agriculture and water and a variety of other topics. These were small affairs involving 30 or 40 people, but they served to help maintain contact and promote cooperation. In October this year IPCRI, with the support of USAID and UNESCO, organized a four day conference which was attended by about 120 participants from the region and about 50 from USA and Europe. About 90 papers were presented and discussions were far ranging and practically oriented. Of course it takes time to see concrete results from such a gathering (other than the book of the proceedings which will be published next year), but they help to create a water community and have the support of donors and of officials from both sides.

The value of such activities is evident particularly in a time of acute conflict when official channels are restricted and confrontational. When IPCRI organized a delegation to the Stockholm Water Week to take part in a seminar on water issues in the region its leading participants were the Israeli Water Commissioner and the head of the Palestinian Water Authority both of whom welcomed the chance to show that there could be cooperation in spite of the present political situation.

IPCRI is, of course, not alone in this field. Friends of the Earth Middle East has managed to keep alive a valuable project designed to promote community awareness about water use in rural communities in Israel, Jordan and Palestine and to work seriously on the problem of the future of the Dead Sea. Its water awareness project has managed to create a network of schools in which water treatment and use are environmentally acceptable and where students are actively engaged in water saving activities. Its work on the Dead Sea has brought together a great deal of previously scattered information and gone some way to persuading UNESCO to recognize the Dead Sea as a World Heritage Site.

These two NGOs are controlled jointly by Israelis and Palestinians but others which are purely Palestinian, such as the Palestinian Hydrology Group (PHG) or the Applied Research Institute in Bethlehem (ARIJ), have also worked on joint projects with Israeli NGOs over the years. Work on the future of the Dead Sea is being done jointly by ARIJ and the Arava Institute in Israel while PHG is active in a number of joint research projects alongside universities and research institutes from Israel.

In addition to NGO initiatives, significant research work on water issues in Israel and Palestine has been done over the last decade by various university departments from Israel and Palestine working in collaboration, often with third parties from Europe and North America. The work of the Truman Institute at the Hebrew University in cooperation with Palestinian scholars from Al Najjar and elsewhere on the mountain aquifer was a good example of joint cooperation. The management of the aquifer is a major bone of contention between the two parties and the information collected and ideas put forward by those engaged in the project contributed to thinking on this thorny topic, even if they did not resolve it.

A number of major research projects involving Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians are currently in operation. Among them are the GLOWA project which has teams from Israel, Palestine and Jordan working on the long term effects of global warming on the Jordan Basin and a 12 year old joint project on hydrology and water technology in the region. Both these are German financed initiatives and are substantial. In GLOWA there are sixteen research teams in Israel, four in Jordan and four in Palestine.

Another interesting joint project is that known as OPTIMA project which is funded under the European Union's 6th Framework – the project is designed to create closer relations between water specialists from the countries of the Mediterranean and more effective use of data and modelling so as to assist decision makers. It has partner teams from Israel and Palestine, Jordan, Tunis, Morocco and other Mediterranean countries.

These efforts by NGOs and academic institutions with support of the donor community have helped to build up a "water community" of experts, academics and officials, member of which work together in spite of the political situation. But their efforts are limited by the acuteness of the current conflict.

ALL NGO AND ACADEMIC COOPERATIVE EFFORTS HAVE LIMITATIONS. – HOW CAN THEY BE PARTIALLY OVERCOME

Big decisions involve Government and decision makers tend to be heavily invested in short term political considerations and are not easily influenced to think seriously about long term environmental issues. While, as has been indicated above, professionals in water share many of the same assumptions and are able to work together, their political masters need education if they are to properly understand the issues and recognize that they must work together if the long term future of water supply in the region is to be guaranteed.

Deep divisions remain over such basic questions as those relating to water rights. These can be alleviated, but not resolved, by such things as the provision of additional fresh water by desalination or the extensive treatment of waste water. Cooperative programs can help to improve relations between the stakeholders but still there are basic issues which will, one day, have to be faced. The question is how to change the face of decision making so that both sides feel they have an equal share in it remains unresolved.

To help in facing these deep confrontation issues there is a need firstly for more innovative thinking, and second more involvement by the international community not merely in funding but in day to day participation in planning and decision making. This involvement can come both through attempting to influence the political process and by working with NGOs and academic institutions as is already being done.

Among innovative ideas which have been floated recently is the idea of the creation of a private company which could draw on international private funding and would manage the water resources of Israel and Palestine jointly. The directors of the company would be nominated by Israel, Palestine and the international community (perhaps through UNDP or a similar United Nations agency). This idea sounds far fetched but is worth looking at in the context of the present impasse.

Another less revolutionary concept envisages the creation of an Israeli - Palestinian Water Council which will represent major stakeholders and function as an advisory body to the Israeli Water Commission and the Palestinian Water Authority as well as promoting awareness among the public on water issues. This idea was already floated by Friends of the Earth Middle East and others but has not received any substantial support.

Yet another concept envisages the direct participation of donors in the work of the Joint Water Committee (the American USAID already has some influence over its deliberations as a major supplier of funding directly and indirectly for the improvement of water infrastructure in the region). This would, in effect, introduce a third party voice into the deliberations of the Committee but it is not clear whether either party would really welcome it.

However there must be thinking "outside the box", if the water problems are to be resolved on a long term basis. Looking outside the region may have some positive advantages. For example the European Union Water Directive may be of value. Its basic premise, that river basins must be managed jointly even if the actual territory is divided between a number of political entities is relevant to the Middle East. If the Danube and Rhine can be managed in this way, why not the Jordan?

There is also the possibility of introducing a neutral element into the discussions about water. The idea of creating an international mediation institute designed to help resolve water issues which could function on a world wide basis and offer its services to those in conflict has surfaced in a number of different discussions recently – the World Water Council and Green Cross International have both floated it (*World Water Council* 2004). If such an institute were established Israel and Palestine would be obvious potential beneficiaries if they were willing to accept that left to themselves they may have difficulty in reaching a settlement acceptable to both sides.

Again more cooperation between donors might give them more say in decision making. In a recent report published by the Swedish government reference is made to the need for international donors to combine in order to offer third party support for regional initiatives in a firm framework, "a facility with a specific mandate to assist regional management of transboundary waters (including smaller basins) would provide a clear focus and the opportunity consolidate international concerns, streamline

initiatives and direct them towards mobilizing the idea of effective international water resources management as a regional public good. This might be relevant in terms of the Israel and Palestine since Israel's water supply is to some extent dependent upon donor financed activities in the West Bank and Gaza such as the treatment of waste water" (*Transboundary Water Management* 2001).

All these ideas and concepts are, however, put forward rather as long term possibilities rather than steps to be taken now. In the meantime NGOs and researchers who wish to contribute to regional understanding and to the public good must keep going. Environment and water issues provide a focus both for dispute and for cooperation. It is up to us to see that the latter becomes the dominant theme.

In the field of water management in an area where there is already water stress and where long term demands are bound to increase if only because of population increase, it is not too extreme to say that without cooperation both sides face a hazardous future. With cooperation the outlook, though still difficult, is essentially hopeful. Desalination, the treatment of waste water, the improvement of distribution systems and the promotion of awareness among all sections of society about the need to save and preserve water resources uncontaminated, all offer the chance for a sustainable future.

REFERENCES

World Water Council. 2004. Triennial Workplan 2004-2006.

Fritzes Kundservice. 2001. *Transboundary Water Management as an International Public Good.* Stockholm.