

FOCUS

Water in the Middle East: How to Manage Scarcity

● Julia Bucknall and team

Improving public accountability can turn political opportunities into better water outcomes

The Middle East and North Africa region faces big and rapidly increasing water problems (figure 1). Per capita resources, only a sixth of the global average, are set to decline by half by 2050. Overpumping of groundwater causes net depletion of national assets valued at the equivalent of up to 2 percent of GDP every year.

The situation is set to get worse. Climate change models predict a decrease in rainfall of at least 20 percent. Environmental degradation of water already costs 1–2.5 percent of GDP every year, and population growth will increase the water quality challenge. The price for taxpayers is high—one in four dollars of capital budgets goes to water in some countries—and expected to increase. The problems result from institutional as well as resource constraints. Institutions in the region are not yet able to adapt to changing water supplies and changing demands from the population.

Who will be affected by this accelerating challenge? Urban residents will see increasingly frequent service outages. Even now water is delivered only twice a month in Amman, Jordan, and only once a month in Taiz, Republic of Yemen. Deteriorating water quality will have an impact on human health and ecosystems. But the greatest impact is likely to be in agriculture, which uses around 80 percent of the region's water. Transforming agricultural production systems while protecting the poor will be a key part of managing the water challenge.

Excellent national strategies exist to guide the region's water ministries

toward more efficient courses of action. But can they be implemented politically? A new report by a World Bank team looks at ways to navigate through the region's changing political economy. Unlike earlier studies, the report treats water as a development challenge rather than a sectoral one, analyzing the impacts of nonwater policies on water.

An international index of the quality of policies and institutions for managing freshwater shows that the region does fairly well relative to a comparable set of developing countries. Yet many nonwater policies inadvertently distort use of this scarce resource. Energy subsidies depress the cost of water services and encourage wasteful use, and price supports for staple crops encourage irrigation of thirsty, low-value crops. Subsidized credit encourages drilling of wells. And the region's overwhelming unemployment problem leaves rural populations dependent on agriculture for livelihoods.

The water problem cannot be managed by water ministries alone. And water reformers can have an important impact if they also work on reforming policies in other sectors.

The report suggests that would-be water reformers analyze the changing dynamics of the political economy to seek opportunities for reform—and that changes in social, technical, environmental, and economic forces are indeed creating such opportunities. The region is experiencing, or on the cusp of, some major transformations—including rapid urbanization, growth of tourism, increasing education of girls,

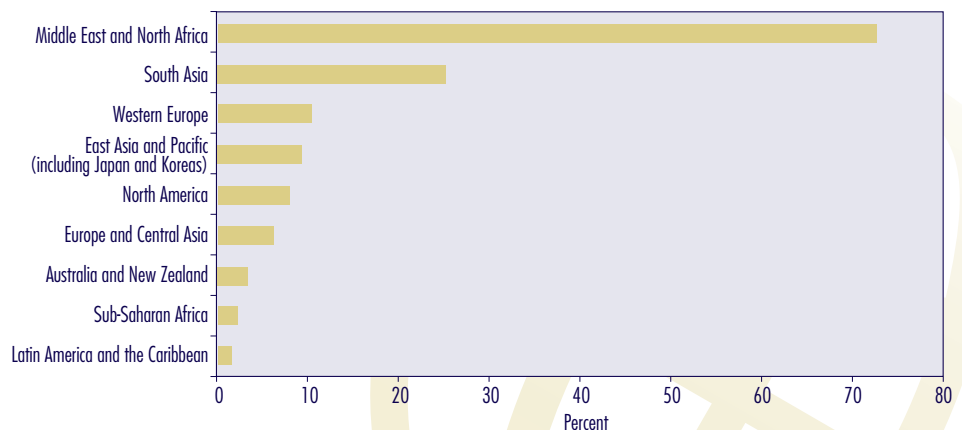
and potential transformation of agriculture. These will change interest group alliances. Educated women may lobby for more investment in sanitation. And a transformed agriculture changes both the ability of farmers to organize and lobby and the services they request. High-value farmers in the Arab Republic of Egypt and Morocco, for example, are lobbying for reliable rather than low-priced irrigation services.

The report also looks at public accountability, generally lower in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa than in other developing countries. Using an internationally comparable index of public accountability, it finds that countries in the region where authorities are more accountable provide better water services than those where authorities are less so. It concludes that measures to improve public accountability—such as releasing information about water services to the public, involving users in decision-making, and setting clear performance standards with consequences for failing to meet them—can turn potential political opportunities into actual improvements in water outcomes.

The report is optimistic that the region will meet its water challenges. But whether the changes can be made without massive cost, borne disproportionately by the poor, will depend on what reforms countries implement, in the water sector and elsewhere.

Julia Bucknall and team. 2007. Making the Most of Scarcity: Accountability for Better Water Management in the Middle East and North Africa. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.

Figure 1. Share of Total Renewable Water Resources Withdrawn, by Region



Source: Compiled from the Food and Agriculture Organization's AQUASTAT data for 1998–2002.
Note: The figure shows the sum of withdrawals across all countries in a region, divided by the sum of all the renewable water available in each country.