

Sustainable Path to Water Security Urgent Priority for Arab World

New World Bank report maps out actions needed to prevent water scarcity from impacting future growth and stability in the Middle East and North Africa

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STOCKHOLM, August 29, 2017 – The inadequate supply of water and sanitation is costing the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region around US\$21 billion per year in economic losses, according to a new World Bank report. Measures to improve the management and distribution of scarce water resources are now vital for the region’s growth and stability.

Beyond Scarcity: Water Security in the Middle East and North Africa draws on regional and global examples to show that limited water resources need not restrict the region’s future, but that a combination of technology, policy and management can convert scarcity into security.

The report was launched today during a special session focused on MENA at the [World Water Week](#) conference in Stockholm, Sweden. Offering a comprehensive analysis of one of the region’s most significant challenges, the report examines the sustainability and efficiency of current water resources management, the challenges to maintain and extend access to affordable water services, and the growth of water-related risks and the adequacy of the actions taken to address them.

“If we think of water resources as a bank account, then the region is now seriously overdrawn,” said **Hafez Ghanem, World Bank Vice President for the Middle East and North Africa**.

“Drawing water from rivers and aquifers faster than they can be replenished is equivalent to living beyond one’s means, and it undermines a country’s natural capital, affecting longer-term wealth and resilience. But there are solutions, and they start with clear incentives to change the way water is managed.”

Over 60 percent of the MENA region’s population lives in areas with high or very high surface water stress, compared to a global average of about 35 percent. Yet despite water scarcity, the region has the world’s lowest water tariffs and, at two percent, the highest proportion of Gross Domestic Product spent on public water subsidies. Low service tariffs discourage efficient use of water. Increasing water service fees would signal the true value of the dwindling resources and encourage conservation. It can also provide financing for water resources protection, infrastructure maintenance, and ensuring equitable and reliable service delivery.

“Along with better water management, there is room for increasing the supply through nonconventional methods such as desalination and recycling,” said **Guangzhe Chen, Senior Director of the World Bank’s Global Water Practice**. *“Fortunately, many countries have*

demonstrated success in implementing innovative programs to reduce the amount of treated water that is lost through leakages before it reaches the customer, as well as producing nonconventional water. The cost-effectiveness of these technologies is also rapidly improving, changing the landscape of options for the next generation of water management.”

The potential for recycling has yet to be fully exploited in the region. Currently, more than half of the wastewater collected in the MENA region is returned to the environment untreated, resulting in both health hazards and wasted water resources. But positive experiences in Jordan and Tunisia show that wastewater can be safely recycled for use in irrigation and managed aquifer recharge. These new technologies combined with new policies can chart a course toward water security, but it will need to be driven by a commitment at all levels of society: from women and young people at the household and community level, to governments ready to cooperate at the regional level.

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