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FINANCING WATER JUSTICE: INTERNATIONAL AID AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE MENA REGION

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Introduction

The need for water justice in the MENA region represents a pressing policy challenge, as governments confront pressures from climate change that threaten water resources. The region is considered one of the most water-scarce in the world,[1] but its geographic diversity means that different countries in MENA face a litany of challenges when securing water and food for their populations in just and sustainable ways. Several of them must address systemic issues in water governance, including unequal allocation, inadequate infrastructure, and uneven access among rural, urban, and displaced populations. Others face increasing droughts, driving vast areas that rely on agriculture for their income into social and economic precarity. Climate change, population growth, and transboundary water tensions further complicate national and regional efforts to ensure fair and sustainable water management.

Since the end of the Second World War, international aid and development organizations have launched technical cooperation projects, often focused on rural water supply and irrigation. Led by the WB and United Nations agencies over the last three decades, bilateral aid agencies and the EU, these international financial institutions (IFIs) have played a significant role in water development – promoting approaches like integrated water resource management (IWRM), as well as lending support for transboundary water management and water governance. This support can be traced back through reams of documentation and convenings that showcase technical assistance and financing for various water development efforts, including dam building, irrigation projects, and wastewater treatment plants, with claims often linked to sustainability principles and sound water management.

Viewing these actions from a water justice lens, we argue that water development processes and structures pertaining to transparent decision-making, participation, and democracy are as important as equitability and fairness in access to water.[2] In this context, the role that IFIs can play in enabling or hindering water justice across various countries in the MENA region warrants scrutiny. This report examines how IFIs might facilitate a just water future for the region, exploring how their practices, investments, and partnerships influence fairness in access, equity, sustainability, and transparency in water governance.

Water in MENA: A Quick Overview

According to the WB, limited availability of water resources has meant that in many areas of the region, farmers have relied on non-renewable groundwater sources, yet this too is being depleted at an unsustainable rate. More than half of the countries in the region depend on groundwater for more than 50% of their water needs.[3] When withdrawal rates increase the ability of groundwater renewal, it is not just the quantity of water that is under threat, but also its quality due to seawater intrusion in coastal zones. These practices are not just individual actions, but are often the result of economic policies that do not sufficiently consider environmental outcomes. For example, in North Africa, farmers' use of groundwater resources is indirectly encouraged by rural development policies that prioritize high-value crops at the expense of sustainable water use, leading to serious water quality impacts in times of drought when water from dams is unavailable.[4]

1 Dominick de Waal et al., The Economics of Water Scarcity in the Middle East and North Africa: Institutional Solutions, World Bank, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1739-7 [de Waal et al., The Economics of Water Scarcity]; According to this report, by 2030, it is expected that the water available per capita in the region will fall below 500 cubic meters per person per year, which will be below the absolute water scarcity threshold.

2 Leila M. Harris et al., "Water Justice: Key Concepts, Debates and Research Agendas", in The Routledge Handbook of Environmental Justice, Ryan Holifield, Jayajit Chakraborty and Gordon Walker (eds.), Routledge, 2017. [Harris et al., "Water Justice"]

3 Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, Groundwater in the Arab Region, ESCWA Water Development Report 9, United Nations, 2021, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4000563?v=pdf [ESCWA, Groundwater in the Arab Region]

4 Marcel Kuper et al., "Liberation or Anarchy? The Janus Nature of Groundwater Use on North Africa's New Irrigation Frontiers", in Integrated Groundwater Management: Concepts, Approaches and Challenges, A. Jakeman, O. Barreteau, R. Hunt, J. D. Rinaudo, & A. Ross (eds.), Springer, 2016, pp. 583–615, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-23576-9_23

In terms of water usage, agriculture is the largest consumer in the MENA region, in most cases accounting for up to 80% of total water use. The shift to cash crops in the last 60 or 70 years has exacerbated the situation. Crops that require considerable amounts of water, such as wheat, rice, water-intensive fruits, or vegetables grown for foreign markets, have put additional stress on available water supplies.[5] Moreover, the rapid growth in population[6] and increased urbanization strain water resources further. With current water management strategies in place, water demand is expected to increase so that by 2050, an additional 25 billion m3 annually will be required to meet the region's needs.[7]

To date, governments in MENA have focused mainly on supply augmentation, such as building more dams, groundwater tapping, and desalination, with much less attention paid to efficiency or better governance.[8] This comes at a great financial and environmental cost.[9] The overuse of groundwater and recourse to water desalination have enabled policymakers to delay action on efficient irrigation options. Such technical fixes dominate current plans and actions in MENA countries, neglecting sustainability strategies and policymaking.[10] Furthermore, water utilities in more than half of the region's cities reported up to 30% non-revenue water (NRW) losses.[11] According to the WB, increased reliance on virtual water[12] – water used to produce essential commodities, such as wheat and cereal imported into the region – has doubled in the last two decades, which exposes MENA countries to supply shocks.[13] This leads to economic and political instability and reduced food resilience when food prices rise, foreshadowing serious political implications in some parts of the region.[14]

Two main aspects of water management reflect the MENA region. First, the drive to achieve economic modernity involves intensive agriculture aimed at export markets and extensive water augmentation projects,[15] with serious implications for rural economies and the environment.[16] Second, weak or ineffective water governance aggravates shortcomings in water management. Where decision-making is centralized, much-needed decisions for fair and efficient water allocation between competing needs become politically unpopular, leading to, in some cases, government inaction and consequently further water mismanagement.[17]

Transboundary water in MENA presents another source of geopolitical tension, mainly along the Nile River Basin,[18] the Tigris-Euphrates basin,[19] and the

5 de Waal et al., The Economics of Water Scarcity.

6 The region's population grew from just over 100 million people in 1960 to more than 500 million in 2023. It is expected to reach more than 700 million by 2050, according to World Bank Open Data, "Population, Total - Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan" accessed April 21, 2025, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=ZQ

7 de Waal et al., The Economics of Water Scarcity.

8 Jeannie Sowers, "Water, Energy and Human Insecurity in the Middle East", ***Middle East Report, no.*** 271 (Summer 2014), https://merip.org/2014/07/water-energy-and-human-insecurity-in-the-middle-east/ [Sowers, "Water, Energy and Human Insecurity"]

9 Hussam Hussein, "Lifting the Veil: Unpacking the discourse of Water Scarcity in Jordan", Environmental Science & Policy 89 (2018) pp. 385–392, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2018.09.007 [Hussein, "Lifting the Veil"]

10 Eric Swyngedouw and Joe Williams, " From Spain's Hydro-Deadlock to the Desalination Fix", Water International 41, no. 1 (2016) pp. 54–73, https://doi.org/10.1080/02508060.2016.1107705

11 Water losses are usually a combination of leaky pipes, water theft from illegal connections, and inaccurate water meters. See Natasha Hall, "Surviving Scarcity: Water and the Future of the Middle East", CSIS, 22 March 2024, https://features.csis.org/surviving-scarcity-water-and-the-future-of-the-middle-east/ [Hall, "Surviving Scarcity"]

12 Abdeslam Boudhar et al., "Assessment of Virtual Water Flows in Morocco's Foreign Trade of Crop Products", ***Resources*** 12, no. 4 (2023), https://doi.org/10.3390/resources12040049

13 Marta Antonelli, Francesco Laio and Stefania Tamea, "Water Resources, Food Security and the Role of Virtual Water Trade in the MENA Region", in Environmental Change And Human Security in Africa and the Middle East, Mohamed Behnassi and Katriona McGlade (eds.), Springer: Cham, 2017, pp. 199–217, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-45648-5_11

14 Alia Gana, "The Rural and Agricultural Roots of the Tunisian Revolution: When Food Security Matters", The International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture Food 19, no. 2 (2012), pp. 201–213, https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01165135v1

15 Marcel Kuper, Pierre-Louis Mayaux and Ahmed Benmihoub, "The Persistent Appeal of the California Agricultural Dream in North Africa", Water Alternatives 16, no. 1 (2023) pp. 39–64, https://www.water-alternatives.org/index.php/alldoc/articles/vol16/v16issue1/689-a16-1-6

16 Farah Boussi, "Impact of Agriculture, Manufacturing, Tourism, and Transportation on Environmental Quality in the Middle East and North Africa region", International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research 10, no. 8 (2025) pp. 3330–3367, https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2025.v10i08.021

17 de Waal et al., The Economics of Water Scarcity.

18 Abren Gelaw and Mulugeta Debele, "International Water Conventions, the Exploitation of Trans-Boundary Rivers and the Nile Water Dispute among Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt", Heliyon 10, no. 21 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e38671

19 Alessandro Tinti, "Scales of Justice: Large Dams and Water Rights in the Tigris-Euphrates Basin", ***Policy and Society*** 42, no. 2 (2023) pp. 184–

Jordan River basin,[20] as well as between bordering countries.[21] These require negotiations and fair agreements to guarantee equitable access and social justice for communities directly affected by shared basin areas. While regional transboundary water governance is beyond the scope of this report, it is important to note the complexities it adds to these fragile water management systems, with implications for stability and security for the region.

Furthermore, the impacts of climate change – with its predicted increase in temperatures, rainfall variations, and frequent droughts – are expected to exacerbate water scarcity.[22] Rising temperatures and more frequent droughts will diminish surface water flows in key basins, such as the Jordan River and Tigris-Euphrates, and expected sea-level rises will salinize coastal aquifers.[23] These environmental stresses threaten agricultural productivity, food security, and rural livelihoods that deepen socio-economic inequalities and increase pressure on already fragile state stability.[24]

Scope and Methodology

The challenges related to water security in the MENA region are not only due to geography and the impact of climate change, but increasingly a problem of management and governance.[25] This report focuses on water justice – i.e., access to water and fair governance that is sustainable and that protects people's livelihoods and well-being. We posit that water justice, as an approach, can support efforts to address good governance for water in countries of the region by drawing attention to equity, transparency, accountability, and engagement with local communities. In addition to rearranging priority areas for water management, a water justice framework helps challenge power dynamics and implores us to ask: who has access to water, who controls that access, and whose voices or opinions count in managing and governing water resources? Given the considerable role that IFIs play (through grants or loans) in financing water development programs and projects, this thematic report provides an overview of water development in the region, focusing on the role of IFIs and delineating what that means for water justice. It analyzes their impact by expanding on the main tenets: (a) equity and access, including affordability and pricing; (b) engagement with local communities and participation; and (c) legal and administrative reforms for sound water governance.

The research methodology is based on policy analysis and key informant interviews with actors who are currently engaged in water development in the MENA region. Their roles can be described as follows:

- Academics and researchers of various specialties in water management, governance, and policymaking.
- Directors or program officers at think-tanks or organizations focused on water development or natural resource management.
- Program directors and officers at IFIs, including UN agencies, WB, and the EU.
- Consultants and water experts with experience working on IFI-funded water projects.
- Project leaders on current water projects that assess the impacts on beneficiaries.

These interviews explored different actors' definitions of water justice, through their reasoning, their experiences working in the water sector, and their opinions regarding the role of IFIs in supporting practices conducive to water justice, including community engagement, policy reforms, and accountability. The interviews were semi-structured, based on a set of questions, but were naturalistic, allowing free-flowing conversations, reiterations, and spontaneous questions or probes. Conducted mostly online, the purpose was to capture diverse perceptions and narratives of water-related developments in the region to assess the potential role that IFIs can play in achieving water justice.

A total of 21 meetings and interviews were conducted between August 2024 and March 2025. Informants

196, https://doi.org/10.1093/polsoc/puad003

20 Mohammad Abu Awash and Adel Abdel Ghafar, Water Diplomacy: How to Prevent Water Wars in the MENA Region, Issue Brief, Middle East Council, January 2025, https://mecouncil.org/publication/water-diplomacy-how-to-prevent-water-wars-in-the-mena-region

21 Mohammadreza Dehshiri and Hamed Hekmatara, "Water Diplomacy and Water Disputes in the Maghreb Region", Technium Social Sciences Journal 10 (2020) pp. 530–543, https:doi.org/10.47577/tssj.v10i1.1329

22 Hall, "Surviving Scarcity".

23 Mohammed Mahmoud, "The Looming Climate and Water Crisis in the Middle East and North Africa", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 19 April 2024, https://tinyurl.com/tw7633nk

24 Sowers, "Water, Energy and Human Insecurity".

25 Hussein, "Lifting the Veil".

were selected using a snowball technique, based on the author's and the Arab Reform Initiative's (ARI) networks in the region. In addition to the interviews and literature, the author benefited from a discussion workshop with other researchers at ARI currently working on water reports for their respective countries in the MENA region.

The following section will briefly introduce the concept of water justice and how it is conceptualized across distributive justice, procedural justice, and recognitional justice.

What Is Water Justice?

Water justice is a framework that emphasizes equitable, rights-based access to water, particularly for marginalized and vulnerable communities or groups. Originating from growing interest in the fair management of water, in light of increased scarcity, the concept is built on environmental justice frameworks and movements, benefiting from the work of scholars and activists in this area.[26] It brings together not only the social and environmental dimensions of water into focus, but also its politics to address questions of control over resources and the distribution of benefits and burdens associated with water developments across the globe. Water resources are diverse, and water bodies can be easily accessible or require access to technologies and other resources for reach or extraction. As such, the multifaceted nature of water is reflected in the multifaceted features of water justice, which is relational and context-specific. To conceptualize water justice, therefore, is to understand it as an approach that can be "actualized through social practice",[27] which urges us to recognize the diversity of views about justice.[28] This means that different communities' and people's understanding of what justice is when it comes to water depends largely on their cultural practices and beliefs, their needs and aspirations, and is inextricably linked to the physical nature of the water sources concerned. Thinking through water justice brings to the fore questions about ownership (common versus individualized, private versus public), the fate of water (extraction and use versus conservation and protection), management (technologies and financial mechanisms), and governance (decision-making, oversight, and sovereignty).[29] In short, by thinking through a justice perspective, we can bring politics into water governance.[30]

Definitions of water justice can be drawn from scholarship in law, philosophy, geography, and environmentalism. Literature on water justice, energy justice, environmental justice,[31] and recent work on climate justice[32] inform different types of justice. The majority of works on justice identify distributive justice, procedural justice, and recognitional justice, with some works referring to transformative justice, restorative justice,[33] and capabilities justice.

In law and philosophy, distributive justice refers to the equitable distribution of the benefits and impacts of a resource, which, in the case of water, concerns allocation, access, and the apportionment of the

26 Margreet Z. Zwarteveen and Rutgerd Boelens, "Defining, Researching and Struggling for Water Justice: Some Conceptual Building Blocks for Research and Action", Water International 39, no. 2 (2014) pp. 143–158, https://doi.org/10.1080/02508060.2014.891168 [Zwarteveen and Boelens, "Defining, Researching and Struggling for Water Justice"]; Harris et al., "Water Justice".

27 Sophia Borgias and Kate Berry, "Navigating Diverse Visions of Water Justice within Unlikely Alliances", Water Alternatives 17, no. 3 (2024) pp. 628–648, https://tinyurl.com/4wjz8zdv [Borgias and Berry, "Navigating Diverse Visions of Water Justice"]

28 Zwarteveen and Boelens, "Defining, Researching and Struggling for Water Justice".

29 Rutgerd Boelens et al. (eds.), Hydrosocial Territories and Water Equity: Theory, Governance, and Sites of Struggle, Routledge, 2017. [Boelens et al. (eds.), Hydrosocial Territories and Water Equity]

30 K. J. Joy et al., "Re-Politicising Water Governance: Exploring Water Re-Allocations in Terms of Justice", Local Environment 19, no.9 (2014) pp.954–973, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2013.870542

31 See for example Boelens et al. (eds.), Hydrosocial Territories and Water Equity; on energy justice, Kirsten Jenkins et al., "Energy Justice: A Conceptual Review", Energy Research & Social Science 11 (2016) pp. 174–182, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2015.10.004 [Jenkins et al., "Energy Justice"]; and more recently, Ben Sovacool et al., "Pluralizing Energy Justice: Incorporating Feminist, Anti-Racist, Indigenous, and Postcolonial Perspectives", Energy Research & Social Sciences 97 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2023.102996; On environmental justice, see Max Liboiron et al., "Models of Justice Evoked in Published Scientific Studies of Plastic Pollution", Facets 8, no. 1 (2023) pp. 1–34, https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2022-0108 [Liboiron et al., "Models of Justice"]

32 Megan Mills-Novoa, Rutgerd Boelens and Jaime Hoogesteger, "Climate Change and Water Justice", in Water and Climate Change, Trevor M. Letcher (ed.), Elsevier, 2022, pp.399–418, https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-323-99875-8.00014-8 [Mills-Novoa, Boelens and Hoogesteger, "Climate Change and Water Justice"]

33 Borgias and Berry, "Navigating Diverse Visions of Water Justice".

costs and impacts associated with its exploitation.[34] Importantly, research in environmental justice has shown how benefits, costs, and hazards are unevenly distributed, whereby burdens disproportionately fall on different racial groups – where some racial groups often have less access, pay more for water, or bear the brunt of polluted water; indigeneity – where indigenous communities' right to water in their regions are unfairly challenged or ignored; location – when water is unfairly diverted away from source toward more populous urban areas; occupation, e.g., diverting water away from farmers toward industry; socio-economic class – where water access is dominated by large farmers at the expense of small and/or subsistence farmers; and gender – where the burden of water provisions befalls on women and girls, amongst others.[35]

Procedural justice is the concept of justice mostly related to governance, concerned with the processes by which decisions are made based on fairness – permitting and facilitating access to all – equity, transparency, accountability, and the possibilities of participation in decision-making.[36] For example, insights from research on energy justice emphasize the importance of engaging all participants in equitable ways, through representation within decision-making institutions and having the power to influence the development and enforcement of laws and regulations that are believed to be fair and equitable.[37] In water governance, instilling procedural justice means ensuring that decisions about water allocation, pricing, and infrastructure are inclusive, transparent, and accountable. Consulting affected communities on water developments should be based on true engagement, not on tokenism. Information and data on water should be available and accessible, together with ensuring that all information about projects and developments is made public.

At the core of recognizing water justice, i.e., why justice matters, is a recognition that water is both social and natural. In other words, the natural aspects of water and the social life that is shaped by water are entangled. This way of seeing it is distinct from looking primarily at cultural beliefs or valuations that consider water as a separate entity; "water" that is "out there". Making this distinction is important because it recognizes that differences between places are the result of local and context-specific ways of practicing and knowing. In that sense, recognitional justice emphasizes the importance of society and culture and respects the unique rights that stem from particular socio-cultural and political identities.[38] This has political implications as recognitional justice underscores the importance of plurality, suggesting diversity in governance framings and principles, and alternative approaches to justice that emphasize dismantling power imbalances, decolonialization, and indigenous sovereignty.

Another type of justice closely linked to law and environmental justice is referred to as restorative justice,[39] which focuses on repairing harms and negative impacts. Considering water, this means attending to the needs of the environment as well as those of a community. In that sense, restorative justice is closely linked to recognitional justice. Unlike distributive and procedural justice that help in designing a course of action, restorative justice engages processes of repair with past injustices. Applied to water, restorative justice can mean recognizing social and ecological harm from dam construction or lost ecosystem restoration. Importantly, it means restoring parity to power imbalances, encouraging fairer practices, and replacing harmful decision-making.

Capabilities justice draws on the work of Nussbaum,[40] which is based on the capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen.[41] This type of justice focuses on the opportunities and freedoms that people and ecosystems need to flourish. Approaches that consider this type of justice focus on prioritizing well-being, self-fulfillment, and the conditions necessary for that. It offers a critique of

34 Chris Knudson, Alida Cantor and Kelly Kay, "Just Water Transitions at the End of Sugar in Maui, Hawai'i", Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space 5, no.4 (2022) pp. 2073–2097, https://doi.org/10.1177/25148486211052869 [Knudson, Cantor and Kay, "Just Water Transitions"]

35 Liboiron et al., "Models of Justice".

36 Knudson, Cantor and Kay, "Just Water Transitions".

37 Jenkins et al., "Energy Justice".

38 Mills-Novoa, Boelens and Hoogesteger, "Climate Change and Water Justice".

39 Miranda Forsyth et al., "A Future Agenda for Environmental Restorative Justice?", The International Journal of Restorative Justice 4, no. 1 (2021), pp.17–40,https://doi.org/10.5553/TIJRJ.000063

40 Martha Nussbaum, "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: SEN and Social Justice", Feminist Economics 9, no. 2–3 (2003) pp. 33–59, https://doi.org/10.1080/1354570022000077926

41 Amartya Sen, Commodities and Capabilities. Oxford University Press, 1999.

liberal policies that prioritize capital and market economies over people's needs, and relates to transformative justice in the way that it encourages us to question the assumptions behind water developments and their objectives. A capabilities justice approach would, e.g., seek to strengthen local CSOs to advocate on water.

Finally, the concept of transformative justice also focuses on existing harms and inequalities; however, it seeks to address them on a large scale and is concerned with dismantling the underlying power structures that produce injustice. It highlights the need to dismantle the systems that produce these injustices, and, in the case of water, it is both its materiality and how water is allowed to flow (i.e., how it is engineered) that leads to winners and losers along its path, which shapes water access and distribution.[42] Transformative justice thus challenges our way of thinking, imploring us to consider new approaches based on co-management, rights of nature, indigenous governance, and post-capitalist models of water commons. This body of work is informed by insights from decolonial studies and critical approaches in environmental humanities.[43] Such perspectives support efforts to transform national water codes, highlight structural imbalances across communities or sectors (e.g., industry or agriculture), and question the role that institutions have in producing and entrenching practices conducive to water injustice. In this space, the role of international institutions, such as the IMF and the WB, as well as the influence of international aid agencies and NGOs, is critiqued and challenged. In Table 1, the different types of justice are outlined, indicating the implications of a transformative approach on these definitions.

Table 1: Implications of a Transformative Justice Approach on Common Types of Justice

Type of Justice	Definition and Implications	How Can It Be Transformative?
Distributive	Distribution of benefits/ burdens on communities Reconsideration of tariffs, access structures, and economic models	Not just "better management" but shifting power over water; who decides, who owns, who profits True balance of power (government to governance)
Procedural	Due process Equality of access and participation	Real democracy where affected communities meaningfully shape water governance Representation of future generations and the non-human world
Recognitional and restorative	Equitable representation Rights of communities are recognized Compensation and legal structures for accountability and responsibility	Acknowledging historical and ongoing injustices, e.g., colonial dispossession of indigenous water rights, or how big dams displace communities Managing water based on local and indigenous knowledge Addressing legacies of harm (e.g., historic IFI influence)

42 Olivia Aubriot et al., "Water Technology, Knowledge and Power. Addressing Them Simultaneously", WIREs Water 5, no. 1 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1002/wat2.1261

43 David Naguib Pellow, What Is Critical Environmental Justice? Polity Press, 2018.

Examining Water Management through a Justice Lens

Following a water justice framework will have implications for the way water is governed in the MENA region. In contrast to other approaches to water management that may prioritize environmental protection or water security, thinking through a justice lens entails putting equity, fairness, and the needs of communities at the center of water-related decisions. This does not mean that these override environmental concerns, since the framework recognizes that the protection of communities goes hand-in-hand with the protection of ecosystems. This duality ensures that the risks of pollution and overextraction are considered not only for their environmental impact but also in how they affect vulnerable populations and marginalized communities.

With regards to fairness, water justice means defining water not as a commodity but as a human right and, in doing so, ensuring that pricing is fair and affordable for all groups, especially those economically or ethnically marginalized. A justice lens should also support decisions that prioritize local management of water resources and fair restorative action to compensate affected communities if harmed. This perspective also has implications for water governance, which means that decision-making will need to be transparent and inclusive of people's requirements, ensuring communities have the opportunity to participate and influence decisions. This means that decisions to privatize water utilities must be scrutinized against profit-driven water management, encouraging instead decisions that support universal access and sustainability. These, of course, entail changes to the legal handling of water – water codes and laws should recognize the right to water, prioritize equity, and protect water resources.

There are also practical implications for water developments in MENA if we are to consider the processes that lead to the financing and commissioning of large projects and investments, such as dams or desalination plants. Also important are the economic decisions that have direct impacts on water use and quality, such as permits for industries or new sources of energy, e.g., green hydrogen or even large tourist or housing developments that increase demand in an area. In the MENA region, most of the states are eligible for IFI funding, suggesting a considerable impact these organizations can have on engendering a just water future for people in those countries. For example, since 2013, EBRD provided Egypt with around €11 billion to fund more than 160 projects, with almost 55% of that investment in infrastructure, including water and sanitation projects.[44] Similarly, in Tunisia, the German Development Bank is committing €1.1 billion to build desalination and wastewater plants.[45] These financial mechanisms greatly shape and influence water management in the region, not only through building the physical infrastructure, but also through instituting principles that guide fiscal policy or through tools such as IWRM – the latter was developed to instill better water management decision-making. Hence, this report critiques the role that IFIs have played and could play in water justice for MENA countries through analyzing the current practices and processes of water development and financing.

Water Governance and Justice in MENA

Institutions, Actors, and Policies

In general, water governance in MENA can be described as centralized, with main decision-making handled by government institutions, typically water and irrigation ministries.[46] Despite some progress made in establishing local water authorities (Lebanon), basin agencies (Morocco), and water user associations (WUA) (Egypt), these often lack adequate financial resources or have limited authority or substantive decision-making for local areas. Another challenge in the policy landscape is water sharing a portfolio with other sectors or

44 Nibal Zgheib, "EBRD supports Egypt's Water Sector with NUCA", EBRD, 03 August 2023, https://tinyurl.com/5eavup23

45 KfW, "Project Information: Water in Tunisia – Managing Scarce Water Resources: A Comprehensive Package of Climate Change Adjustment Projects", April 2024, https://tinyurl.com/ycybhhmx

46 de Waal et al., The Economics of Water Scarcity.

resources, such as in Tunisia, for example, where water is governed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources, and Fisheries, or Lebanon, where it is part of the Ministry of Water and Energy.[47] Most countries in the region have legal frameworks that govern water supply and consumption, either as water codes (Tunisia and Algeria) or through water laws, such as those in Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon, and Yemen.[48] Others, such as Jordan, have published water strategies outlining laws that govern water and, in most cases, underscoring water as a right.[49]

In addition to recognizing water as a public good, the legal frameworks in MENA countries outline regulations for groundwater and surface water extraction and use, rules for issuing extraction permits, pollution control measures, and provisions for WUAs.[50] Notably, the different countries' water strategies refer to IWRM as the main principle for water management, specifically in relation to demand management, efficiency, and participation.[51] This research finds IWRM to be a popular discourse around which an effective coalition has formed that has successfully promoted it among nations, particularly those in need of financial support in the global South, including the MENA region.[52]

Here, it is important to note that the adoption of IWRM as an approach should not preclude further scrutiny of said governments in relation to water governance. By definition, IWRM is a process which "promotes the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources to maximize economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems".[53] IWRM calls for a holistic approach that links water to land use, social and economic development, and environmental protection. It espouses the following principles: (a) water should be managed within river basin boundaries, (b) water should be treated as an economic good and should be used efficiently, (c) water development and management should be participatory, and (d) the role of women in the provision, management, and safeguarding of water must be recognized. Importantly, proponents of IWRM encourage water demand management, rather than water augmentation, as national strategies.[54]

IWRM can be described as a dominant paradigm as it is effectively pushed by the Global Water Partnership (GWP),[55] adopted by UN agencies through various programs, and enshrined in Sustainable Development Goal 6.[56] The discourse coalition around IWRM has led to its proliferation as a tool for reforming and modernizing water governance. However, this drive hinders any objective assessment of IWRM's ability to realize sustainable outcomes for water management.[57]

47 Mufleh Al-Alaween et al. (eds.), Water Integrity in the Middle East and North Africa Region: Synthesis Report of Water Integrity Risks Assessments in Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine and Tunisia, UNDP-SIWI Water Governance Facility, November 2016, https://tinyurl.com/yunxw76u

48 de Waal et al., The Economics of Water Scarcity.

49 Ministry of Water and Irrigation, National Water Strategy for Jordan 2016 – 2025, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, 2016, https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/jor156264E.pdf [Ministry of Water and Irrigation, National Water Strategy]

50 Water User Associations (WUAs) are locally organized groups of agricultural water users who collectively manage, operate, and maintain irrigation systems or shared water infrastructure in their area. Establishing WUAs are an important step in decentralizing water management, as promoted by IWRM.

51 Ministry of Water and Irrigation, National Water Strategy.

52 Asit K. Biswas, "Integrated Water Resource Management: A Reassessment", Water International 29, no. 2 (2004) pp. 248–256, https://doi.org/10.1080/02508060408691775 [Biswas, "Integrated Water Resource Management"]

53 Water Knowledge hub, "IWRM Explained", accessed 20 April 2025, https://iwrmactionhub.org/about/iwrm-explained

54 Philip Woodhouse and Mike Muller, "Water Governance: An Historical Perspective on Current Debates", World Development 92 (2017), pp. 225–241, https: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2016.11.014

55 The origins of IWRM lie in early developments during the 1960s and 70s when systems theorists and hydrologists wanted to promote an integrated approach to basin management, instead of the then dominant sectoral approaches. The 1977 Mar de Plata UN Water Conference framed water as a resource requiring integrated management approaches. A decade later, the Bruntland report emphasized the need for cross-sectoral management of water. In the early 1990s, the Dublin Conference for Water and the Environment articulated the main principles of IWRM. The 1992 Rio Earth Summit adopted IWRM as a policy framework for achieving water sustainability. In 1996, the Global Water Partnership was established by the World Bank, UNDP, and SIDA to promote IWRM globally – operationalizing the concept through donor programs, capacity-building, and national water strategies.

56 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Sustainable Development: Goal 6", https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal6

57 For criticisms leveled at IWRM as a discourse, see Tony Allan, "IWRM/IWRMAM: A New Sanctioned Discourse?" (occasional paper, University of London, 2003), https://tinyurl.com/33mhba64; Jeremy Allouche, "The Birth and Spread of IWRM – A Case Study of Global Policy Diffusion and Translation", Water Alternatives 9, no. 3 (2016) pp. 412-433, https://tinyurl.com/5n6ehtwf; Lyla Mehta et al., "Introduction to the Special Issue – Flows and Practices: The Politics of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) in Southern Africa", Water Alternatives 9, no. 3

On further scrutiny, IWRM principles are found to be unimplementable because they are vague, providing poorly defined parameters of what this management could look like.[58] The ambiguity in its principles and application has meant that IWRM is interpreted and implemented in different ways, often shaped by political and economic interests.[59] In this sense, it is "invested in, and reappropriated by, various constituencies as a means of forwarding their agendas or as a smokescreen for business-as-usual strategies".[60] In doing so, the concept lends legitimacy to what can otherwise be described as unsustainable or inefficient water policies and projects. From the perspective of water justice, IWRM has been found lacking in terms of equity as practical applications have always prioritized economic efficiency.[61] In recent years, the main components of water justice (distributional, procedural, and recognitional) have been adopted in an attempt to operationalize equity within IWRM,[62] but the implications of that are yet to be seen. These criticisms and developments since suggest that water justice as a lens and framework remains necessary, even if the entirety of a government's water policy is based on IWRM principles.

When it comes to water governance in the MENA region, IWRM is rarely implemented, in the full sense, given the ambiguity of its principles, which often leads to paralysis. Moreover, the fact that it is brought into the workings of a ministry or water authority through international funding further weakens its potential as an effective paradigm to improve water governance – many people view it as a Western-imposed idea and will only superficially adopt it to secure needed funds. As one research participant put it:

You'll find foreign organizations going on about IWRM. "This is the future of governance!" they say, and it's lovely on paper, but the experiences of trying to implement it are superficial. Outcomes are fairly limited, and it's often done in a way that is performative. If I'm the government of a country, and the foreign aid package is bundled up, and one of the elements in there is IWRM, I'll say this sounds like a nightmare. But it is $600 million to build a series of dams or pipes … so I'll say yes, because at least that way I get the things I know I need. And then if we have some meetings and call it IWRM, that's fine. That's a little cynical, but that's the sort of thing that happens.[63]

A more holistic approach to IWRM is the WEFE Nexus framework. This approach has the potential to guide a more holistic process for water management. The GWP defines WEFE Nexus [64] as an integrated multisectoral approach that aims to reconcile conflicting interests when it comes to economic development and the exploitation of natural resources (Figure 1). An assessment of the interlinkages, synergies, and trade-offs across sectors informs Nexus thinking with the objective of finding solutions – to that end, GWP has developed a toolbox.[65] The approach also promotes "governance and management responses"[66] to inform better decision-making, such as financial instruments, institutional mechanisms, legislation, planning, etc.

(2016), pp. 389–411, https://tinyurl.com/59f53f2n [Mehta et al., "Introduction to the Special Issue"]

58 Biswas, "Integrated Water Resource Management".

59 Mehta et al., "Introduction to the Special Issue".

60 Francois Molle, "Nirvana Concepts, Narratives and Policy Models: Insight from the Water Sector", Water Alternatives 1, no. 1 (2008) pp. 131–156, https://tinyurl.com/mtrsk5ap

61 Jeremy Allouche, "Where is Equity in Integrated Approaches for Water Resources Management?", Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Environmental Science (2020), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199389414.013.619

62 Cydney K. Seigerman et al., "Operationalizing Equity for Integrated Water Resources Management", Journal of the American Water Resources Association 59, no. 2 (2023) pp. 281–298, https://doi.org/10.1111/1752-1688.13086

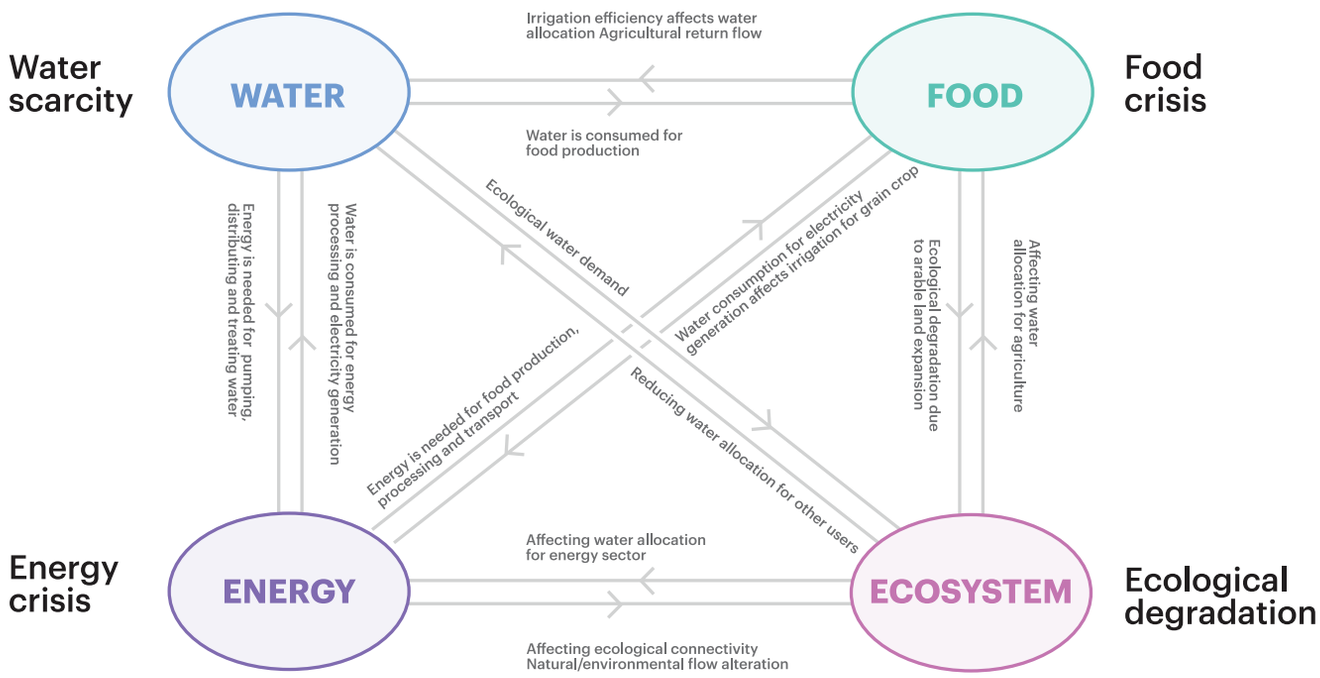
63 Water development consultant (Interview A), interview by author, online, 23 September 2024, virtual.

64 For a simple description of the WEFE Nexus, see Global Water Partnership, "What is the WEFE Nexus?", https://tinyurl.com/4y2462mz; For further reading on WEFE, see Mohamed *Behnassi et al., "Governance, Policies and Research Options for the WEFE Nexus", in Interlinking Climate Change with the Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystems (WEFE) Nexus in the Mediterranean Basin, Phillipe Drobinski et al. (eds.), MedECC Reports, pp. 203–239 (2024),* https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13378654

65 The link to the toolbox can be found at United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, "GWP: Integrated Water Resources Management Toolbox", https://tinyurl.com/y6tezktx

66 Water researcher (Interview D), interview by author, online, 06 March 2025.

Figure 1: The Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystems (WEFE) Nexus Relationship



Source: Yuan Ma et al., "Collaborative Management of Water-Energy-Food- Ecosystems Nexus in Central Asia under Uncertainty", Water Resources Research 60, no. 3 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1029/2023WR035166

At the interface with IFIs, WEFE Nexus thinking can address the problem of siloed decision-making or fragmented development. As one expert explains:

This is why I put so much emphasis on the strategy of WEFE because it will be a strategy that attempts to make normal what is otherwise complex. If we continue saying: "No, this is that, make it simple, leave this out, and try another project to pay for that." This is not acceptable. This is one of the crucial things, and we have spent years and years with financiers to make them understand that the real world is complex.[67]

Unlike IWRM, which starts with water concerns, WEFE Nexus approaches look at all three sectors from the start, bringing together food and agricultural priorities and integrating them with energy and environmental/ecosystem concerns. It also emphasizes equity and participation, championing women's engagement, and engagement to protect indigenous rights and communities – two principles that are also part of IWRM. Yet, the literature on WEFE Nexus does not present a mechanism through which to operationalize these justice-related aims, suggesting perhaps that holistic environmental management is still the priority rather than broad transformative governance systems that can engender justice. While it can be an improvement on thinking with IWRM, insofar as water governance is concerned, the approach remains chiefly technical with insufficient guidance to implement much-needed institutional and governmental reforms to realize water justice.

Another aspect to unpack in understanding water justice is the way water is governed, mainly with respect to decentralization and privatization in MENA. Levels of decentralization vary across the region. For example, water governance in Egypt and Tunisia can be described as fairly centralized. In Lebanon, however, water authorities were established along administrative regions, giving them some level of autonomy in terms of financial and administrative responsibilities. In Lebanon and Jordan, localized water authorities have been established around water basins, e.g., the Litani

67 Water researcher (Interview D), interview by author, online, 06 March 2025.

River Authority and the Jordan Valley Authority, giving operational autonomy based on a nationally agreed water plan. In Morocco, Hydraulic Basin Agencies draft their own water plans, which are then aggregated into a national water plan.[68] Meanwhile, decentralization efforts in Iraq have not yet succeeded in bringing autonomy to services sectors in the country, including water and sanitation.[69]

Attempts at privatizing water services in MENA countries have had mixed results. In Jordan, where water is privatized the most in the region, the Aqaba Water Company and the Amman Water Authority have contracted management to private companies, as well as several Build-Operate-Transfer projects aimed at improving technical efficiency. Although this has improved billing and efficiency, water affordability remains a concern, and the state has to continue to subsidize water.[70] In Morocco, and since the IMF's structural adjustment programs in the 1980s, private companies provide water and sanitation services to the big cities, expanding in recent years to include smaller towns.[71] These decisions have, for years now, faced local opposition and continue to be controversial, with detrimental impacts on affected communities.[72] Agricultural water in Morocco is not yet privatized but remains individualized because of the way groundwater extraction is governed.[73] Other countries, such as Egypt, Lebanon, and Tunisia, have more limited private sector involvement, although their governments face a continuous push through IFI investments and programs for reforms aimed at decentralizing and establishing legal frameworks for private sector participation.[74]

Furthermore, MENA countries often struggle with weak enforcement and monitoring of laws that prevent uncontrolled groundwater extraction and water pollution. As one research participant complained: "For example, in Lebanon, we have a lot of laws, but we do not have the right implementation."[75] The situation in Morocco presents an interesting case where CSOs are represented in Hydraulic Basin Agencies, showing possible avenues for community participation in agricultural water. However, what public protests indicate is that in broader national debates regarding water plans and sector restructuring, more engagement and participation are needed.

On an administrative level, governments often lack the structures necessary to push through reforms and improvements in water services. Several ministries have overlapping mandates, such as in Egypt or Morocco, where ministries oversee different aspects of water management, such as pricing and tariffs (Ministry of Finance), agricultural user associations (Ministry of Agriculture), and drinking water and sanitation (Ministry of Interior). Another way to explain this inertia is by recognizing the competition between the different administrations – for a resource that is becoming scarce, for the financial means to mobilize it, and the different rationales and administrative traditions on the social and economic use of water that are carried out by different water institutions.[76] These complexities can slow down the pace of change needed to engender justice, whether through implementing fairer tariffs or protecting water sources from pollution. In the following section, this report provides an analysis of the role that international development actors play in water development and governance in MENA.

Understanding Water Justice for MENA

There are deficits in justice. There are deficits in the accountability of government. There are people who effectively have very limited, if any, rights. So, when people start talking about water justice, it has to be seen through a broader lens of political rights, social rights, and human rights.[77]

Before discussing the impact of IFIs on water justice

68 Water researcher (Interview A), interview by author, online, 05 September 2024.

69 Mike Fleet, Decentralization and Its Discontents in Iraq, Policy Paper 2019-18, Middle East Institute, 25 September 2019, https://tinyurl.com/yutpfzty

70 The Jordan Times, "Water Ministry to 'Gradually Increase' Water Tariff", 22 March 2023, https://tinyurl.com/5n8ea7zv

71 Soufiance Elgoumri, Ongoing Debates over Water and Electricity Privatization in Morocco, Policy Analysis, Fikra Forum, The Washington Institute, 1 May 2024, https://tinyurl.com/yescn86w

72 Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis, Environmental Advocacy in Morocco: Challenges, Strategies and Institutional Barriers, March 2025, https://mipa.institute/?p=11625&lang=en

73 Water researcher (Interview A), interview by author, online, 05 September 2024.

74 L'Orient Today, "World Bank Approves US$257.8 million to Improve Water Supply Services", 15 January 2025, https://tinyurl.com/332ez763

75 Aid agency officer, interview by author, online, 27 August 2024.

76 Water researcher (Interview C), interview by author, online, 11 September 2024.

77 Water development consultant (Interview A), interview by author, online, 23 September 2024.

in MENA, this research explored the different ways water justice is understood or conceptualized by the research participants' knowledge and experiences, as the quote above illustrates. For some, thinking through justice presented an opportunity to politicize debates on water, which, over decades, has been cast as an engineering or technical challenge. Other participants emphasized social justice as a prerequisite to water justice, arguing that water justice cannot be achieved without people having their economic and political rights constituted first. Most of the themes that emerge from interviews and discussions with research participants correspond to the different types of justice introduced earlier in this report, in addition to conceptions that arise from the environmental realities and priorities of the MENA region and in climate change responses that began to take hold in recent years, with a focus on adaptation and reparations for countries of the global South.

Recognition, Participation, and Community Empowerment

A water justice lens underscores the importance of recognizing the impacts of water on local communities, not only in terms of environmental and social impacts (nature and livelihoods) but also in terms of constructing a relationship between the state and these communities. As one research participant explained:

Water justice is about the upstream and downstream communities and the ecosystem … in that they can all benefit from water in a just way that meets their needs. For example, the impacts of a large dam are unfair for those living downstream. From a water justice perspective, instead of investing in one large dam, I would build smaller dams, maybe ten, along a river so more people can benefit from investments.[78]

In that sense, the water justice perspective encourages a broader reading of water resources. It includes recognizing and seeing the people and communities living by water sources. This is important when water resources are extracted from rural communities and transferred to populous towns and city centers, such as the water highways that supply Rabat and Casablanca in Morocco or the Driss I dam that supplies the cities of Fez and Meknes. These projects, while aiming to meet water-related needs of populous cities, deprive rural areas of services like running water in school buildings.[79] This highlights the importance of fair treatment toward these communities, which involves adequate compensation – direct or indirect investments in services and education paid for by the revenue from the extracted water – thus avoiding disenfranchisement and the negative consequences that come with it.[80]

With regards to stakeholder engagement, the perception of some research participants was that engagement is non-existent in worst cases and is, at best, tokenistic. But even if there were true opportunities for engagement, many felt that the problem lies with the capacity to engage. One aspect of that capacity is training project officers and civil servants in the skills needed to design and conduct meaningful engagement and public participation. Quite often, town hall meetings were organized toward the end of a project, with the process akin to securing consent. Another aspect is the lack of capacity to integrate the opinions and knowledge of community members into management practices. As one participant stated: "We do conferences, meetings, take meeting minutes … all very nice, but once you are back in the office, there is no follow-up."[81] This inability to "follow up" is due to the lack of capacity for engagement.

This willingness to engage is contrasted by the different opinions among several of those interviewed. Some expressed doubt regarding the importance of engagement and public participation in MENA societies. Instead, the argument in response to questions on engagement referred to the need for education and empowerment of farmers and communities, which were seen as prerequisites to effective and meaningful engagement. Some participants emphasized the need for awareness and education for the population at large, to stem wasteful water consumption practices, or, in the case of farmers, reduce unsustainable irrigation practices. One argument for the need to tackle public awareness in the media and in the education system was that public debates on water only happen in times of drought, with less concern for

78 Director of a water research center, interview by author, online, 27 February 2024.

79 Water researcher, workshop participant, online, 05 December 2024.

80 Former aid agency officer, interview by author, online, 06 September 2024.

81 Director of a water research center, interview by author, online, 27 February2025.

other years. [82]

Similarly, doubt was cast on the legitimacy of CSOs or environmental NGOs in taking part in policymaking or development. According to one engineer who worked on several water development projects: "In my experience, we spend many hours trying to make a project happen with limited resources and under difficult circumstances, and then the environmental NGOs come because we have to invite them, but they don't help. They don't come up with any alternatives."[83] Nevertheless, there's a sense that when it comes to water provision, people and farmers want to have an adequate service and, "there is no need for talking about it, it just needs to be done".[84] This quote underscores the bottom line: people need water through their tap, and farmers need to be able to irrigate their lands. With many cities and agricultural areas underserved in the MENA region, research participants felt that public consultation and participation were superfluous, opting instead to focus on implementing the laws that protect from pollution and overextraction, and improve accountability.

Water Justice and Fair Access

A core aspect of water justice for all research participants was access to water and affordability. This aspect had perhaps the most variation across the region, with countries that have the right infrastructure but suffer shortages due to drought, such as Morocco and Jordan; to those that have the infrastructure but occasionally are unable to supply water due to technical problems and lack of maintenance, such as Tunisia and Lebanon; and finally, countries that do not have adequate infrastructure for the necessary levels of supply. Countries in this last category are perhaps the most extreme, where residents end up with the most expensive water bills – relying on purchasing trucked water in addition to their normal water bills. Participants emphasized the need for governments to ensure that infrastructure is in place for water justice to be realized. This is not to say that technical solutions were privileged or perceived as the solution to all problems, rather that if the required infrastructure is lacking, any discussion on justice will "feel hollow".[85]

Another important constituent of access is safe drinking water and clean water for irrigation. For several of the research participants, water in many parts of the MENA region is not considered safe for drinking, forcing many to buy bottled water, even in low-income households. Incidents of untreated water for irrigation have also had serious health impacts on consumers. This lack of safety exacerbates inequality and imposes another layer of water injustice on people. It also erodes trust in government bodies – municipalities, ministries, and water authorities. To restore trust, arguably an essential component of a functioning water system, reforms that establish accountability for polluters and improve law enforcement are a must.

The absence of law enforcement exacerbates access to irrigation water. With the advent of cheaper water pumping technology and solar PV, farmers have been over-extracting groundwater using deep drilling. This practice is, of course, available to wealthier or larger farmers who are able to leverage their revenue to invest in pumping equipment. Poorer farmers, as a result, are left with dry wells on their land, worsening their yields and revenues. The inability of governments to enforce fines for illegal drilling can have devastating consequences on both the social well-being of farming communities and the environmental integrity of their lands. It is important to note that in some cases, the government's desire to have large agri-businesses dominates the rural investment landscape – perceived as a form of modernization – has meant that such privileges were protected for large farmers – mostly wealthy and male.[86] This case, alongside many others in the region, showcases the intersectionalities with gender and income for rural communities reliant on farming.

A crucial element of water access is water affordability. While most agree that water should not be commodified and should instead be a universal right, a tariff or a price for water needs to be paid to maintain systems of provision. Hence, water authorities should charge for their water services,

82 Development expert, workshop participant, online, 05 December 2024.

83 Water development consultant (Interview B), interview by author, Beirut, 18 December 2024.

84 Water researcher (Interview B), interview by author, online, 18 November 2024.

85 Aid agency officer, interview by author, online, 27 August 2024.

86 Lisa Bossenbroek and Margreet Zwarteveen, "New Spaces for Water Justice? Groundwater Extraction and Changing Gendered Subjectivities in Morocco's Saïss Region", in Routledge Handbook of Gender and Water Governance, Tatiana Acevedo-Guerrero et al. (eds.), Routledge, 2024, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003100379-16

i.e., costs associated with bringing water to the user, rather than a price for water. Coupled with a fair distribution of irrigation permits – allocated on the basis of size of land and type of crop – the cost of water should be made "fair and affordable to all the farmers, if there are sufficient amounts of water".[87] Such government interventions are necessary to realize water equity. This perspective accepts an economic view of water, insofar as it carries value to its users. Here, adhering to the principles of justice is crucial; accepting an economic meaning of water and pricing it as a service – not a commodity – and importantly, making it available to communities and economic groups (such as farmers) who understand its value. Furthermore, this also means choosing tariff structures that guarantee affordable pricing across different income groups. Without these principles in place, water grabbing remains a risk by industry, large farmers, and other more powerful actors.

Water Justice as Responsibility and Preparedness

Justice as an approach draws attention to responsibility, and this has been expressed in both its temporal and spatial dimensions. The first is the responsibility toward future generations, which is an important element of recognitional justice. The recognition that overextraction of water at an unsustainable rate leads to groundwater wells drying up[88] is not only harmful to the ecosystem but has serious implications for future water availability. Hence, intergenerational equity, a core tenet of sustainable development, is invoked by a water justice approach. Many of the experts interviewed believe that there is a lack of long-term planning for the health of the ecosystem, with one describing the prevalent "reactive nature in decision-making",[89] where decisions are made after a problem arises. Some sensed that, in the Arab world, there are reams of paper dedicated to water strategies, but these are rarely coupled with realizable action plans – action plans with timeframes and key performance indicators. Another temporal aspect of responsibility links water development plans and strategies to climate change. This means seriously considering the impacts of climate change on water availability in MENA and putting into action plans and projects to combat its worst effects in relation to scarcity and increased risk of droughts.

Responsibility in a spatial sense is in the need to expand care and engagement with all communities and beyond borders. For the former, this means reaching marginalized communities and paying attention to the challenges faced by low-income farmers and poorer households. The latter aspect touches upon transboundary water management, as seeing through a water justice lens draws attention to other priority areas for action, such as supporting dialogue between communities across shared water resources. For example, by getting a real sense of the challenges faced by farmers in Syria, farmers' behaviors and attitudes in Türkiye can change, leading to better awareness of the common risks associated with water and developing a cooperative attitude. Attending to those sensitivities, while also exchanging experiences and ideas, was felt to be an important local-level engagement in transboundary water relations and, consequently, water justice.

An aspect of responsibility less commonly discussed is emergency preparedness. Justice means ensuring that risks associated with water developments are minimized in cases of emergencies and extreme events. Often, communities in the vicinity of large water developments bear the brunt of effects from these developments and suffer the worst outcomes if the infrastructure is not adequately maintained or designed to standards compatible with emergency preparedness. Disaster prevention is central to achieving water justice. One research participant lamented the lack of drought planning in MENA countries, despite increased vulnerability to it compared to the preparedness of countries in the global North:

> We were in Holland two years ago, and it is a water-rich country, but that year they had a drought, and they were very much impacted because their infrastructure is based on plentiful water availability. Yet, they had a plan which they had prepared years before … and that was put into action that year. That is preparedness, but in our region, we only react and panic.[90]

With regards to who holds this responsibility, participants believe that the duty for funding and implementing sound water development projects

87 Water development consultant (Interview C), interview by author, online, 16 October 2024.

88 ESCWA, Groundwater in the Arab Region.

89 Aid agency officer, interview by author, Beirut, 27 February 2025.

90 Director of a water researcher center, interview by author, online, 27 February 2025.

should fall on the government, and several have expressed frustration that the provision of public services should be linked to IFI budgets and agendas. The argument, instead, was that water services are linked not only to food security but to health and well-being, and are therefore a matter of sovereignty for countries of the MENA region and should be treated as such.

A Framework for Water Justice in MENA?

From discussions with research participants on what water justice means, a framework for MENA begins to emerge. Firstly, justice requires a functioning infrastructure – without the means to make water available to populations, we cannot talk of justice. Access is also linked to water affordability, hence fair pricing is crucial, as well as safety from disasters and extreme events. The role of community engagement and participation cannot be emphasized enough, but empowerment through social development and education is arguably an important prerequisite. Finally, responsible policy as a broad concept is included here to indicate government responsibility toward its people and the environment, as well as people's responsibility toward the environment and each other.

Figure 2: A Framework for Water Justice in the MENA Region

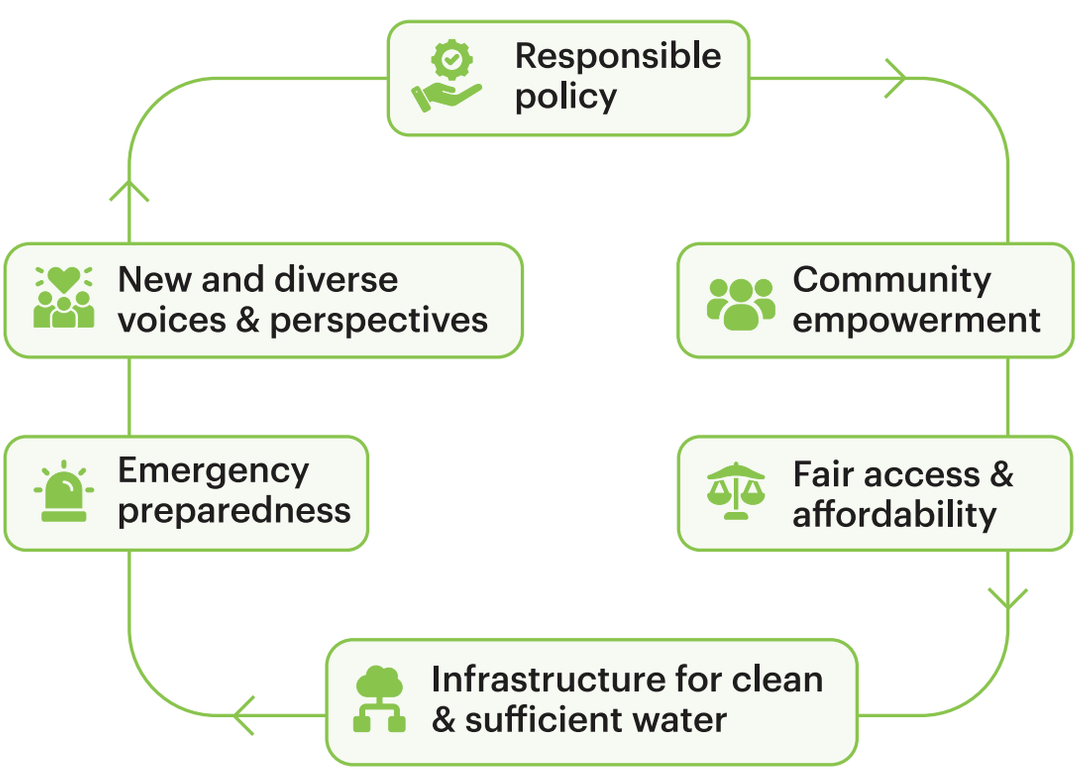


Figure 2 presents a framework for thinking through water justice in the MENA region. These categories correspond in different ways to the three types of justice presented earlier in this report. For example, responsible policy directly connects to procedural justice as it pertains to effective decision-making. However, in response to climate change, it is linked to emergency preparedness, which corresponds to distributive justice, i.e., the fair distribution of impacts from water developments across populations. These interlinkages reflect the complexity of water governance in a region rife with acute and long-term challenges. Nevertheless, the purpose of developing a framework is not to add yet another water management tool but rather to equip water experts with a holistic governance approach that puts the needs of communities at the center.

Water Justice and International Development in MENA

This section briefly presents the broad picture in relation to IFI involvement in the water sector in MENA, focusing mainly on the EU, although development banks and bilateral funding agencies play some part in the overall water development landscape. This is followed by a discussion of the impact of IFIs on the sector from a water justice perspective.

International Interventions and Water Governance

IFIs have always played an important role in water development in MENA. Historically, funding from the WB made large development projects in the region possible. The WB portfolio on the water sector focuses on infrastructure, climate adaptation, and water policy. Examples include water resource management in Tunisia, Egypt, and Palestine, and large-scale water supply and sanitation projects in Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco. The EU supports water developments through financial aid, policy dialogue, technical cooperation, and partnerships with regional institutions. Aid is provided through the EU Neighborhood Instrument, and loans and blended finance through EIB and EBRD. These funding schemes not only target investments and projects, but can also be allocated to support regulatory reforms and capacity building for the relevant public sector entity. For example, AFD, through funding from the EU, provides a technical assistance program to support sectoral reforms in Lebanon.[91]

91 Agence Française de Développement (AFD), "Technical Assistance Program in Support of Reforms in the Water and Wastewater Sector in Lebanon – Water Reform", French Republique, accessed 21 April 2025, https://tinyurl.com/2z7pmnzx

Table 2: The Role of Bilateral Development Agencies in Water Development in MENA[92]

Agency	Type of Support	Focus Areas
GIZ	Technical and policy support	IWRM, water governance, capacity building
IDRC	Research funding, policy support for climate resilience	Governance, equity, climate adaptation, innovation
USAID	Technical assistance, institution building	Utilities, sanitation, and access to safe drinking water, transboundary cooperation
SIDA	Capacity building, policy support	Water integrity and sustainability, peace and diplomacy, gender and water
AFD	Technical and policy support	Urban water & sanitation, water utility reform
SDC	Policy support, sanitation, diplomacy	Transboundary water, peacebuilding, local resilience, sanitation program assistance, water integrity

Additionally, cross-border cooperation is supported via intergovernmental organizations, such as the Union for the Mediterranean, which provide technical assistance to development projects within their remit. Key programs in this area include: MENAWARA followed by MEDWAYCAP[93] for non-conventional water reuse, and MEDISS[94] for groundwater protection. Bilateral development agencies also play an important role in the water sector in MENA. Table 1 presents a summary of the main active agencies and their areas of focus in water development.

92 For more information on the different bilateral agencies' work on water, see GIZ's perspective on water development, GIZ, "Water: The Key to Development", https://www.giz.de/en/expertise/infrastructure/water; IDRC's work on climate change adaptation, IDRC, "What We Do", https://tinyurl.com/48usbzfh; USAID, Robert P. Beschel Jr., Paul Dyer and Tarik M. Yousef, USAID in MENA: A Requiem, Policy Note, Middle East Council, February 2025, https://mecouncil.org/publication/usaid-in-mena-a-requiem/; SIDA's work on water in MENA, SIDA, "Middle East and North Africa: Climate, Environment and Sustainable Use of Natural Resources", https://tinyurl.com/3sfevh7h; AFD, "Middle East Regional Office", https://www.afd.fr/en/regional-office/middle-east

93 MENAWARA and MEDWAYCAP, "Legislation", accessed 21 April 2025, https://www.menawara.eu/course/index.php?categoryid=3

94 MEDISS, "Descriptive summary", accessed 21 April 2025, https://wefe4med.eu/demo/mediterranean-integrated-system-water-supply-mediss

Impacts of IFI Interventions on Water Justice in MENA

Political Agendas and Neo-Liberal Policies

There was no doubt in the minds of many research participants that foreign aid and investment come with specific agendas. For one, money and investments are used to contain or even suppress political change and other aspirations of the people in the MENA region. One example is the flow of international aid and investment to countries like Jordan in order to maintain political stability, where funding is used in placating different community groups through infrastructure investments.[95] The implications are that the choice of an area for development within a country is often informed by the political priorities of the governments or rulers, rather than the country's water needs.

The second aspect of international aid and investment is that it drives a neo-liberal economic approach and therefore prioritizes legal and administrative reforms to reduce

95 Mohammed Torki Bani Salameh, "Political Reform in Jordan: Reality and Aspirations", World Affairs 180, no. 4 (2018) pp. 47–78, https://doi.org/10.1177/0043820018765373

government intervention and influence. It does so by a combination of corporatization of public institutions and subsequently their privatization, and by decentralization of water utilities. This is exemplified in one research participant's comment regarding the WB:

The bank as a whole has a view of water in which it is an economic input, essential for growing the economy, and it's a social good in terms of water. I think the bank is not that far away conceptually from a lot of water practitioners. But when it comes to operational lending decisions, I think that they opt for the [economic input] approach.[96]

Similarly, EIB emphasizes in its own literature the commercial considerations for water, arguing that without those in place, water will be undervalued and underpriced.[97] They encourage monetization to ensure cost recovery for otherwise expensive investments and for political and social reforms, including stakeholder engagement, to be implemented in order to improve the acceptability of tariffs and pricing. While this research understands the importance of the fiscal viability of water developments in the region, quite often tariffs are imposed without much consideration given to the quality of the service and the economic impacts this has on low- and middle-income households.[98]

The push for privatization and corporatization has led in many cases to increases in the price of water, without considering water's affordability, hence not obtaining the public's much-needed consent – consent that is unlikely to be granted to the policymakers when the quality of service and other development challenges are not being addressed. Furthermore, the corporatization of water authorities means changes in employment conditions for hundreds of workers, differentiating between newly employed private employees and older civil servants in the water sector,[99] which can have significant social and financial implications (lay-offs, redundancies, etc.).

This approach to funding not only impacts strategic planning and development in beneficiary states but can also impact equity. For example, investments for sanitation – which are capital-intensive and thus require international funding – are often led by UN-Habitat and funded through various national and international development banks. The recent trend has been to decentralize these projects and invest in sanitation projects that serve specific neighborhoods or urban areas, led by the belief that decentralized decision-making will lead to better cost recovery. However, cost-recovery is key in this scenario, where investments will ultimately target wealthier areas, resulting in well-served areas, whilst poorer neighborhoods remain underdeveloped. As one participant stated:

If you take the example of Cairo, you'll have sanitation in Zamalik, Garden City, and Ma'ady and the rest, a sea of areas and people that are not adequately serviced. This is the problem of decentralization. It is a big problem, and it is connected to corporatization and cost-recovery.[100]

Siloed Funding Policies

The third aspect is that different IFIs have different goals and priorities, issuing regular funding schemes and programs, and many projects could be co-funded through different funding schemes and across different agencies. For example, a project to build and commission a wastewater treatment plant would be led by the EU Neighborhood Instrument regional program with funding aid and loans from EBRD and capacity building provided by GIZ. This is a best-case scenario, with cooperation among IFIs. However, in practice, ministries often struggle to identify funding to meet their goals when different funding bodies can only fund one aspect of a project, e.g., capacity building. This sometimes results in unmet project goals, conflicting timeframes, and uncertainties. In the wastewater plant scenario, capacity building might not be achieved in time for commissioning, which results in delays.

Furthermore, the siloed nature of IFI funding can limit the scope and actions of a government. Putting aside the critiques of increased nation-state dependence on foreign aid, accountability

96 Water development consultant (Interview B), interview by author, online, 18 December 2024.

97 European Investment Bank (EIB), Evaluation of EIB Support for the Water Sector Outside the European Union (from 2010 to 2021), February 2023, https://tinyurl.com/ycy7cnc7 [EIB, Evaluation of EIB Support]

98 Rayya Al Muheisen, "New Water, Sanitation Tariffs Weigh Heavy on Many Households", The Jordan Times, 18 September 2023, https://tinyurl.com/5t3mxm5k

99 Basil Mahayni, "Crisis in Jordan's Water Sector? Understanding the Dynamics of Institutional and Political Constraints in Water Management and Corporatization Reforms" (master's thesis, University of Minnesota), May 2015, https://hdl.handle.net/11299/175244

100 Former aid agency officer, interview by author, online, 06 September 2024.

in water governance should mean that ministries and decision-makers have the opportunity to exercise responsibility, but the strict IFI rules and conditionalities can delimit their sphere of action. As one participant put it bluntly:

You get a ridiculous situation. When I was working in [country name removed], various donors came to us and said, "We'd like to put money into this national irrigation development plan," and [a bilateral development agency] came along and they said, "what's the priority?" And I said: "It's roads. It's access roads to the irrigation schemes that are actually working." They said: "Oh, we can't put road finance into the Irrigation Sector."[101]

These insights show that IFI practices can have detrimental impacts on water justice. In this case, the needs of the population, especially those in peripheral, often left-out communities, are not met due to spending restrictions from donors and financing agencies.

Fragmentation in the Water Sector

Donor and IFI engagement with the beneficiary entity varies depending on the type of project: irrigation, water infrastructure, or wastewater treatment. For example, water and wastewater management projects are limited in size and geographically specific, involving what EIB describes as low-capacity institutions, such as municipalities that do not necessarily have the experience or the technical know-how for operating these projects sustainably.[102] This reflects a theme that emerged from several interviews: fragmentation in water development. Relatively costly projects are completed and can possibly function well, but are not linked to the rest of a country's systems and not integrated into a nationwide water development strategy. The interest in localized interventions, or projects with limited scope, is to simplify processes, keep them within budget, and target local authorities with capacity building in order to foster decentralization in the long term. However, it leads to fragmentation in water development.

This should not be blamed solely on IFIs; the beneficiary government is also lacking when it comes to planning and effective strategies. The research found that there is also a suboptimal distribution of administrative responsibilities when it comes to water. Governments in MENA often lack planning ministries, cooperation, or at least coordination amongst ministries and agencies, as one research participant explains:

Every country has its own system for setting up priorities, but the problem is that every sector sets out its own priorities … but we need to sit together because the water sector might prioritize improving irrigation capacity, and the agricultural ministry might have a similar goal, but the approach is different. This means that we need to organize and improve internal processes and to have one voice from each country that is able to raise the priorities to donor agencies and grant-giving organizations.[103]

Though this is not unique to the water sector, it does reflect the complexity in water governance in many countries in MENA, leading to the various ministries or agencies competing to secure resources for their respective water services across multiple uses like drinking, sanitation, and irrigation – services that span different sectoral bodies. This competition is also reflected in their vying to secure funding from IFIs and bilateral agencies, which then underscores the fragmentation observed by many in the field. This fragmentation has implications for distributive justice, since not all communities benefit fairly. The failure to link projects to existing systems and to build them within a broad strategy means some communities are often left out. The complexity of administrative arrangements can have negative implications when it comes to accountability, particularly when projects, e.g., wastewater treatment plants, are cross-sectoral.

National Governments and Sovereignty

In terms of setting up priorities, findings show that national governments should set priorities, which are presumably based on the social and economic needs of their populations. Available funding, in loans and grants, is then allocated based on these priorities and reflected in the proposals submitted by the ministries. Projects are then proposed, and the process of arriving at the final project plan should be coordinated between the relevant ministry or ministries and the funding body. In that sense, IFIs do not influence the process; however, as one research participant states: "They do not dig

101 Water development consultant (Interview C), interview by author, online, 16 October 2024.

102 EIB, Evaluation of EIB Support.

103 Director of a water research center, interview by author, online, 27 February 2025.

deeper or question how these priorities were set."[104] This brings to the fore the issue of sovereignty in relation to water and international interventions, which is a critical discussion point when it comes to IFI impact on water justice.

A shared notion from this research is that the water sector is socially critical and often subjected to a tug-of-war along party-political lines, or populism associated with governments maintaining the status quo.[105] This is sometimes manifested in corruption owing to the high levels of financial resources involved and the fact that water utilities are mostly publicly controlled in MENA countries.[106] In response to corruption, many donor agencies – especially bilateral agencies like the SIDA or GIZ – opt to work through the third sector in a beneficiary country, often a national NGO or an NGO coalition. One co-benefit is that this arguably opens up the opportunity to engage directly with civil society actors and CSOs. However, two problems were pointed out with regard to this approach: the first is that many of those NGOs are themselves corrupt, with dubious mechanisms to ensure their transparency and fiscal responsibility; the second is that the NGOs are often elite organizations themselves, which also risks the value of the project insofar as its outcomes and benefits are concerned.

People, Vulnerable Groups, and Water Justice

In a similar vein to national governments' views on participation, IFIs tend to have an instrumental view of stakeholder engagement; the goal is to secure consent to a particular development or policy rather than meet ethical standards or environmental protection. For example, EIB (alongside cost-recovery) promotes stakeholder engagement, but this belies a desire to secure social acceptance, rather than genuinely engage with the views and needs of local populations.

One informant from an IFI organization was candid regarding participation:

We are trying to push in favor of local engagement, working with NGOs and with civil society. But in big urban areas, with big companies and big private operations, the role for civil society remains limited, and we have no real means of changing this situation. We always encourage governments to dialogue with beneficiaries, with population representatives through civil society, NGOs, etc., but we can only encourage them, we cannot force them.[107]

This example indicates clearly that conditions on stakeholder engagement are rarely obligatory, and where they are admittedly easier to organize as part of rural projects, the bulk of engagement is largely focused on rural dwellers. The quality of that participation is not controlled, and often those invited to participate may not be communities directly impacted by a particular intervention, or "they can be leaders of such communities who become 'professionals of participation' and who can often be disconnected from the needs of the people".[108] As another participant explained, the process can sometimes risk drowning out the voice of those more relevant to the project in the interest of achieving high numbers of participants or reporting on well-attended public events. This practice shows that when it comes to procedural justice, meaningful stakeholder engagement and effective participation are not yet the norm, even though this engagement is needed to build trust with communities, secure project sustainability, and protect the water resource. In urban areas, meaningful engagement should not only be designed to secure consent for tariff increases, but to build toward constructive dialogue on service provision, needed investments, costs, and ownership.

From a water justice perspective, this reality highlights how, in fact, vulnerable groups are rarely targeted and, if so, often the approach is tokenistic and at arm's length. An example of arm's length is enlisting a women's NGO as a stakeholder on a rural project rather than effective engagement with female farmers, hence evading meaningful participation. Tokenistic approaches have also been prevalent, where a count of the number of female engineers or consultants is used as a box-ticking exercise. Moreover, some participants felt the language often employed when it came to women was patronizing, highlighting the importance of properly assessing women's rights and their participation in public life in each country, instead of making general

104 Former aid agency officer, interview by author, online, 06 September 2024.

105 de Waal et al., The Economics of Water Scarcity; EIB, Evaluation of EIB Support.

106 EIB, Evaluation of EIB Support.

107 Development program officer, interview by author, online, 12 February 2025.

108 Water researcher (Interview A), interview by author, online, 05 September 2024.

assumptions about the MENA region. Much like recognizing natural or socio-economic differences between MENA countries, so is the recognition of cultural and social differences. As for other groups, such as vulnerable communities and youth, many of the same dynamics play out, with those seldom effectively engaged with.

Finally, an important element of water justice is ensuring essential water services reach refugees and internally displaced people (IDP). An overview of IFI interventions shows that, unfortunately, this process has also been siloed, i.e., agencies and finance schemes focused on IDPs in countries, such as Lebanon and Jordan, often manage water needs without adequately integrating them with local water management or governance mechanisms. Justified under necessary humanitarian interventions, these approaches exacerbate existing water access problems and produce a dual service system. The reasons can be wide-ranging. For example, the Lebanese government's reluctance to lead on IDP hosting and care means relying on a patchwork approach of IFIs and NGOs. Other reasons pertain to funding practices, where money allocated for refugees falls into a different scheme than schemes targeting, for example, long-standing water shortages or pollution. Nevertheless, the picture that emerges is one where water justice is absent, particularly when thinking about the losers resulting from these practices.

Discussion: Realizing Water Justice in MENA

One purpose of this research was to unpack what water justice as a concept could imply for the MENA region, given the challenges in relation to water scarcity, climate change, and increased water demand. The thematic focus of the report was to explore the potential role that IFIs could play in engendering water justice. However, insights from the interviews conducted and readings on water in the MENA region suggest that IFI interventions can negatively impact water justice, and, in some cases, do not ameliorate existing injustices. In relation to equity, the negative impact is understood clearly with fingers pointing toward a push for corporatization and a focus on cost-recovery, leading to high water prices. Public participation and institutionalizing democratic processes are not prioritized, instead the focus is on the projects, regardless of whether these respond to national strategies or are joined-up to realize effective development in MENA.

The hidden or conflicted agendas of funding agencies generate distrust in these institutions among many experts, delimiting possibilities for true cooperation based on respect and knowledge exchange. The lack of trust and legitimacy remains a problem for the public water sector in the region.[109] Beyond the water sector, countries in the region perform below average in international transparency, participation, and accountability indicator ratings. Although development efforts have addressed this, in the case of water, through much-needed reforms in the sector, enforcement and the full implementation of laws remain limited, leading to incidents of corruption,[110] e.g., large farmers aided by powerful connections benefit more from agricultural development strategies.

Related to that are problems with information transparency and access. In some MENA countries, there is a lack of comprehensive data on water, whilst in others, data is not readily available or access to it is prohibited. This means that policies are either based on old, outdated data or broad estimates. One research participant admitted they are "not aware of a process which is informed by real plans, real numbers, or has a feasibility test".[111] The lack of data – as well as the right to access this data when available – results in inadequately planned projects or developments, permits corruption and theft, and hinders effective and informed engagement.

Transformative water justice entails democratic processes and meaningful participation in decision-making, i.e., spaces for local CSOs and communities to engage with water policy design and water developments. In practice, this report finds that donors and IFIs do not prioritize these areas when it comes to promoting policy reform,

109 Yogita U. Mumssen and Thelma Triche (eds.), with support from Norhan Sadik and Ali Dirioz, Status of Water Sector Regulation in the Middle East and North Africa, World Bank, June 2017, https://tinyurl.com/2ebummur

110 Marie Chêne, Overview of Corruption in MENA Countries, U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, Chr. Michelsen Institute, November 2007, https://tinyurl.com/bdht53c6

111 Water development consultant (Interview C), interview by author, online, 16 October, 2024.

rather conditionalities center around pricing for full-cost recovery, private sector participation, and decentralization. This makes it harder to achieve true engagement with local communities, as well as to tackle accountability to address corruption. As one research participant pointed out:

There is the issue of trust with the community. We cannot have someone driving their big Jeep or fancy car and tell people, "Oh, we are here to tell you about protecting the environment." These [issues] may appear trivial, but they have a real impact.[112]

This reflects top-down approaches followed by minimal links to local communities, making true justice, in this regard, far-fetched.

The lack of engagement, participation, and accountability in MENA countries contrasts with water development processes that take place in donor agency countries and those that influence IFIs. One argument is that these institutions should place conditionalities on governments to force local engagement and democratic policies. However, the question of sovereignty – itself a water justice demand – compels us to consider how much of development interventions should be conditional and how much influence should IFIs have on national governments. Afterall, institutional sovereignty is as important as resource sovereignty. Exploring this in relation to water, it is important to recognize that since the 1980s, IFIs shaped water policy in the MENA region, resulting in the building of large dams, developing irrigation schemes, and establishing centralized utilities as engines of modernization. A decade later, structural adjustment programs pushed tariff reforms, entrenched cost recovery, and promoted privatization. Although it delivered infrastructure, the price was sidelining local knowledge and community engagement.

This development logic ignores structural inequalities and political realities. As the examples above have shown, tariff increases triggered public opposition because fiscal soundness was prioritized over affordability and access. In countries like Iraq or Egypt, decentralization did not improve the transparency, participation, or equity that these changes promised. Therefore, even though IFIs promote sustainability – and for water management, advanced approaches like IWRM and now WEFE Nexus, all while emphasizing sustainable development goals – their practices deepen dependence on foreign aid and erode institutional sovereignty.

Complete sovereignty over water resources is an essential element of water justice,[113] particularly from a transformative justice perspective, which critiques the influence of former colonial powers and calls for autonomy and the return of resource control to local communities and indigenous groups. Countries in MENA enjoy different levels of resource sovereignty over their natural resources, including water. These variations depend on how much water is in shared basins (Egypt, Jordan) and on conflict and political disputes (Palestine, Lebanon). Institutional sovereignty is reflected in a country's full autonomy to define national water strategies and policy priorities without donor and finance conditionalities. This, however, is a challenge given funding needs for infrastructure and climate change. Thus, sovereignty becomes *procedural rather than substantive*; states retain nominal control but little freedom to define their water futures. However, there are examples of resistance to state capture and donor dependency, such as the "Save the Bisri Valley" campaign in Lebanon and the anti-privatization protests in Morocco or Jordan. These movements, regardless of their success, reassert the right to water and the ability to shape water development decisions.

Lastly, the lack of holistic and inclusive strategic thinking means that the water sector remains fragmented, suffering from overlapping governance structures and inefficiencies. This is perhaps best summed up by the quote below:

You need to get into a process where you're actually really sitting down and saying, "Well, where do we as a country want to prioritize our water to maximize social benefits and economic returns?" Because at the moment, it's often simply treated as an input to activities like generating energy or food, rather than seen as being a lens to thinking about, "Okay, where is the trajectory for a sustainable future for our society," which is perhaps a little hifalutin … but it should be the way to think through some of the challenges that water-scarce countries in the region

112 Director of a water research center, interview by author, online, 27 February 2025.

113 Civil society actors and water policy experts interviewed for this report argued that sovereignty is an essential element of water justice and the right to define how water is governed, distributed and valued that is free from both state authoritarianism and donor technocracy.

face.[114]

This concern prompts us to think urgently about what approaches we can use to think holistically and strategically about water resources in the MENA, natural resource governance, and the importance of protecting our food and energy sovereignty.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Water justice, as a concept, serves not only as an analytical lens to help us identify injustices, but perhaps it should be promoted as a framework to guide our thinking in ways conducive to our well-being and sustainability. Results from this report suggest that when it comes to realizing water justice in the MENA region, IFIs and donor agencies do not currently support it, nor do they effectively contribute to its institutionalization in the future. The arguments and literature cited make a strong case for water governance instead of development. This means centering sovereign approaches that take a holistic and integrated view toward water resources, drawing up inclusive strategies, responding to people's needs directly, and addressing future climate change risks. National governments should seek funding and technical support to draw up drought and flood preparedness plans.

When it comes to funding and investments in infrastructure, water justice requires inclusive, long-term, sustainable, and beneficial strategic decisions. This may entail nationally prioritizing water and establishing sovereign funding mechanisms to reduce dependency on IFIs. In the long term, new financing sources should replace the current dominant international investment banks. However, in the short-term, aid agencies engaged in water development projects should build partnerships with national governments based on carefully assessed needs and developed strategies. They should also engage effectively with local authorities and communities, but ensure these practices do not lead to a fragmented development landscape shaped by siloed financing decisions.

In the meantime, IFIs should shift their focus to policy mechanisms that achieve stability and prosperity. This means that water access and affordability should be the main focus rather than full-cost recovery and corporatization. While it is tempting to view privatization as a means to fight long-entrenched government corruption, the social costs of private sector involvement should be ameliorated so that lower-income groups and marginalized communities are not left out. This means defining water as a social good and promoting pricing schemes that do not punish the poor, whether block tariffs, social tariffs, or subsidies (or a combination of all three).

In relation to engagement and participation, interventions should be designed around community empowerment, which means focusing on public and local community consultation, as well as decentralized systems for agricultural water and irrigation developments. Even though these processes may not directly democratize decision-making around water, they will, in the medium to long term, institutionalize mechanisms that enable communities and farmers to have their say when it comes to water resources. To ensure marginalized groups – such as women, youth, or IDPs – are empowered, adequate social development funding should be maintained to protect these groups' welfare. Without this, encouraging their participation in water development decision-making will remain tokenistic.

Addressing farmer poverty is more conducive to protecting against groundwater overextraction than enforcing laws around it or meting out legal punishments. To that end, international financing and aid should foster social protection and social justice for farmers and assess the impacts of national agricultural policies.

Funding in many countries in MENA, such as in Lebanon and Syria, responds to immediate needs, but in other they are needed to maintain existing infrastructure. Yet, in both cases, programs can be insufficient or characterized by limited timescales. To illustrate, management reform projects often lack sufficient funding for software licenses – essential for data collection and information access – meaning that data is only collected for a few years after project completion. The financial sustainability of water projects should therefore be considered when allocating funding.

Financing continuous capacity building is crucial.

114 Water development consultant (Interview A), interview by author, online, 23 September 2024.

In this regard, training should be informed by more holistic approaches, such as WEFE Nexus thinking, as well as training civil servants on public participation and community engagement – an essential how-to to ensure just water outcomes.

Finally, sound policy and governance are at the center of water justice. National governments should support developing and modernizing their administrative structures to ensure simplified and effective policymaking and enforcement. Depending on different countries' needs, these can include financing offices or agencies tasked with monitoring and accountability, or emergency response committees that are ready to mobilize in case of crisis. Administrative and government reform should ensure legal frameworks outline clear roles for agencies, ministries, and other government institutions when implementing policy to minimize overlap.

About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

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