

Lebanon access to clean drinking water: A missing agenda

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While some friends have urged me to comment on possible economic recovery plan, I am not writing this article to dissect the country's macroeconomic situation or the IMF possible fiscal and monetary program. A lot has already been said on the economic front, but not enough on urgent sectorial issues. I feel the need to address one of the other pressing issues facing Lebanon, which is, in fact, a basic human rights issue: access to clean drinking water.

For three decades, since the end of the Civil War, we have been dreaming of a country built on justice, equity and transparency, and one that provides its people with essential services, including water and electricity. In my previous senior position at the World Bank, I had a first-hand view of the issues blocking progress, including bad investments, poor management, and corruption – the latter being notorious in Lebanon. I often did not agree with the approaches taken by successive governments to dealing with the issues that have faced Lebanon over the past 30 years, but I hope that the new government will be serious about reforms of this vital sector. Of course, one could raise similar concerns regarding electricity, solid waste disposal, public transport and other basic infrastructure and services. But today I want to focus on one vital sector: water and highlight few concerns and questions to the forthcoming Government

Why, until today, does our people still not have access to clean drinking water 24 hours a day, seven day a week?

With abundant water resources, one would expect continuous clean drinking water across the country. One would also expect that, given the government's billion dollar budget and its many expenditures on improving infrastructure over the last 30 years, adequate drinking water and a functional sewage network would be the norm. They are not. They are, in fact, the exception in Lebanon. The bulk of the Lebanese still face intermittent water supply and poor-quality drinking water. Throughout the year, all households – rich and poor – supplement their household water supply to varying degrees, depending on the city they live in. In Beirut, for example, some households have access to government-provided water only three hours a day and rely on water storage tanks and on tanker trucks delivering water to their homes to make up the shortfall.

Since we are considered a water-rich country why Lebanon has experienced chronic water scarcity over the last 30 years? As one of the few countries in the region benefiting from plentiful rainfall, Lebanon has in principle potentially sufficient water resources to meet its domestic demand. The irony is that while drinking water is in short supply, almost every year, Lebanon experiences major floods; houses drown in water, cars sink in the streets, and our municipalities are always surprised, because they did not expect such amount of rain. This year, our lovely city of Beirut was particularly impacted. The Salim Salam tunnel was closed due to flooding because electric pumps meant to clear water from inside failed during a downpour.

Although investments were made in the sector through loans and grants from international organizations, there is little progress to show to people. Who is accountable?

Despite a series of government investments in infrastructure projects over the last 30 years funded and supported by many development partners, successive governments have failed to deliver quality and continuous drinking water for our entire population. Groundwater is an important source of water in Lebanon. It accounts for 50 percent of irrigation water and 80 percent of drinking water. However, groundwater quality is heavily compromised by untreated wastewater and high salinity in coastal regions. Furthermore, much of the available water is wasted. Less than 10 percent of wastewater is treated before being released to the environment. As a result, much of Lebanon's groundwater simply flows out to the sea. Public utility-delivered drinking water is treated before distribution, but the quality of the water that reaches the citizen remains questionable, so many people rely on bottled water. Meanwhile, more than 20,000 largely illegal boreholes in greater Beirut and Mount Lebanon provide water to households across the income spectrum.

One argument often put forward is that the estimated 1.5 million displaced Syrians now living in Lebanon have put the country's water supply under mounting pressure. This is fair statement, as the UN estimates that demand on water services has increased by almost 30 percent with the Syrian crisis. But the reality is that Lebanon's water crisis existed long before the influx of Syrian refugees. Decades of civil unrest and underinvestment, mismanagement and corruption have splintered the water infrastructure in towns and cities.

My long experience tells me that, like all basic services, water and sanitation cannot be improved in isolation. They require an integrated approach: Water and sanitation are directly linked to each other and are also connected to services such as wastewater treatment, energy provision and refuse collection. The development of the wastewater sector is still at an embryonic stage in Lebanon, with only a few small wastewater treatment plants in operation. Meanwhile across Lebanon, water losses average 40 percent, and collection efficiency is low; while water tariffs do not allow for cost recovery, and, although low, they are regressive.

Lack of coordination?

Despite the recent efforts to strengthen coordination, the Regional Water Authorities lack coordination has resulted in inefficient sequencing of investments. The Energy and Water Ministry is the main agency with oversight and regulatory power in the water sector, including water resource management. The ministry exercises technical oversight ('tutelle')

over the Regional Water Authorities, is responsible for pollution control, setting water standards, and enforcing legislation.

The line ministry's ability to perform oversight functions is however hampered by limited monitoring and enforcement capacity and the lack of appropriate regulatory instruments or their implementation – in particular in the area of water pollution control. In addition, the private segment of the water supply industry, in spite of its important market share, operates off the radar screen of the line ministry.

The Council of Development of Reconstruction is still one of the leading agencies in charge of planning and executing donor-funded water and wastewater investments. Several other agencies are involved in the planning and execution of investments. The ministry takes responsibility for budget-financed investments. The Regional Water Authorities may execute small capital works based on cash flow availability. The Council of the South and the Central Fund for the Displaced also play an important role in financing investment in water supply. The Council of the South is responsible for the rehabilitation of the water supply network in the South region. The Central Fund for the Displaced is in charge of providing access to basic services, including water supply, to displaced households.

What does the future government intend to do to remedy this situation? Why almost all past economic recovery plans are completely silent on water issues?

The United Nations has recognized the right to safe and clean water as a human right. As such, it should be a priority for decision makers and for the new government.

Until recently, water-related legislation in Lebanon was inadequate, but in 2000, Water Law 221/2000 reorganized the sector into regional water establishments. I had been advising the government at that time and pushing for the reforms, and I was excited to see a new legal framework.

Since then, we have waited over 20 years to see tangible changes and results. There is still no strategic or business planning, nor a focus on service delivery or performance. The sector is still chaotic. The Water and Energy Ministry seems to focus on energy and to pay little attention to water, much less sanitation.

I am happy to hear that a second wave of institutional reforms seems to be contemplated, with the enactment of a national Water Code after the donors pushed hard on the former two governments. While enactment of the Water Code will help sector development, in my opinion, it is, however, unlikely to deliver the expected gains unless there is a strong political will to address seriously the challenges facing the water sector and review all projects based on sound economic, environmental and social analysis.

What is the way forward for the new government?

From my experience of over 30 years, in an institutional context like Lebanon characterized by weak accountability between government/policymakers and service providers, lack of governance and embedded corruption, and vested interests, the new government needs to draw a clear road map focusing its efforts on policy reforms of this vital sector on:

- (a) adopting a clear framework for implementing reform sequencing, balancing costs and benefits between consumers and water companies;
- (b) investment in improving water quality and reducing losses to generate positive health and financial returns for households;
- and (c) ensuring the financial viability and sustainability of the sector. We don't need projects that are necessarily big on scale, but rather smart and affordable one.

The time has come for real change, reform and delivery ... and no more promises. We have been waiting too long to see tangible results in the water sector.

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