

Report from
Roundtable Discussion
on **Water Challenges in the MENA Region**

Amman, 26 September 2023



Swedish Dialogue Institute
for the Middle East and North Africa

Executive summary

In connection with a visit to Jordan by the prominent water expert Dr. Martina Klimes from Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI), the Dialogue Institute hosted a roundtable discussion on regional water issues on September 26th. It was a diverse group of stakeholders with an interest in water who gathered to discuss existing challenges as well as recommendations for action. In addition to SIWI, the participants included representatives from academia, civil society, the donor community and media, from the MENA region and Europe. The Dialogue Institute's Director Charlotta Sparre facilitated the discussion.

One set of the conversation focused on the awareness issue surrounding water. Although water scarcity is a reality for many countries in the MENA region, the urgent nature of these challenges does not necessarily form part of the collective consciousness. Interlocutors argued that this is due to a lack of attention given to environmental issues in both educational systems and in the media.

Another part of the discussion focused on the central need for continuous collaboration between sectors. Water issues, being intricately linked to the human-made climate crisis, cannot be resolved within a vacuum, but rather require simultaneous and coordinated effort on several fronts. It was emphasized that a range of stakeholders need to partake in formulating solutions. This is needed both for reaching sustainable impact and for getting a greater buy-in from society.

The conversation also covered challenges and opportunities for transboundary water dialogues. It was underlined that candid and constructive dialogues are needed, as a means of avoiding the blame game, which can often characterize ineffective water diplomacy. Improving one's understanding of others' challenges and needs with regards to water increases the likelihood of finding solutions that can benefit all parties.

Participants also underscored the importance of good water governance and concluded that responsive governance has a better ability to act on the climate and water crisis. Meanwhile it is imperative to have fiscal incentives for advancing a blue transition. It was also advised that water management be decentralized to give ownership to local communities and create a greater sense of responsibility.



Some of the participants in the roundtable meeting.

Detailed report

At the end of September, the Dialogue Institute hosted a group of professionals, working on water and climate, to partake in a roundtable discussion on water diplomacy. The meeting took place in connection with a visit to Amman by the renowned water expert Dr. Martina Klimes of the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI). It gathered expertise from academia, civil society, the donor community, and media, from the MENA region and Europe. Charlotta Sparre, Director of the Dialogue Institute, facilitated the dialogue.

The conversation centered on the multidimensional obstacles to an effective blue transition and the equally multifaceted ways of overcoming these impediments. What follows is a summary of the discussions.

Information and education

The MENA region suffers from an awareness issue with regards to water. Despite being the most water scarce region in the world, awareness levels of the issue are generally low. Participants pointed to several explanatory factors. In terms of education, teaching about environmental conditions and their underlying anthropogenic causes is largely absent. Priority in education, as well as in policymaking, is often given to other issues perceived as more pressing.

In academia, the incentives, and mechanisms for locally produced research on climate and water are often poor. Much of such academic output is stemming from outside the region itself and there is a deficit in information available in Arabic. Moreover, the research which is produced and published is rarely translated into policy.

Another obstacle to improving awareness, which was highlighted by participants, is limited media reporting on environmental issues, including on water. This stems in part from other policy issues being given priority, in part from limited in-depth knowledge on these issues.

Broad-based cooperation

Several participants argued that for water action to be effective, it must be created in parallel with broader climate action and through coordination between different sectors – by including the civil society and public as well as private sectors. The climate and water aspects of other policy matters, such as security-related ones, must be accounted for and an environmental perspective should be introduced across a range of issues and sectors. The dilemma of how to apply a security lens to water issues without further securitizing them was, however, raised.

As a transboundary issue, corresponding solutions pertaining to water will also have to cross sectoral lines. The problem of working in silos exists not only between sectors and organizations, but also within them. Dialogue on green and blue issues should therefore take place on multiple levels, drawing on a wide range of expertise and perspectives.

In addition to broadening the base of activity to include diverse sectors, climate and water action should also seek to include broad segments of society. Women and youth, for example, have particular considerations within regional water challenges and their specific perspectives and needs must therefore be part of the formulation of solutions, if they are to benefit all.

Water diplomacy

The interlocutors also brought up the existing confines of the diplomatic space and what action can be taken with respect to those limitations. It was stressed that informal exchanges on the topic of water between stakeholders and decision-makers should serve to complement official meetings, both within and between countries.

Informal dialogues about water issues would allow dialoguing parties to set official positions aside momentarily, to discuss their concerns more creatively, and thereby develop a greater mutual understanding for the needs and concerns of each other. Given the sensitive political nature of water issues, such conversations can help avoid antagonistic relations over water. Such trust-building processes are key to creating mutual understanding and empathy, which will be indispensable for finding blue solutions that transcend national borders.

Participants also discussed how water diplomacy should strive to overcome the blame game which is commonplace in official meetings on the topic. Such deflection of responsibility risks exacerbating pressing water challenges by delaying much-needed action. Furthermore, they stressed the importance of implementing developed strategies.

Governance and economic development

Another segment of the discussion focused on the nexus between water and governance. Interlocutors stressed that governance must respond to the climate challenges, including that of water scarcity, in a holistic way, while also taking responsibility for water mismanagement incidents. They also said it was advisable to decentralize water management and argued that giving local entities ownership of water issues would encourage more responsible practices.

Water scarcity, due to poor water management as well as changing climate conditions, is leading former regional breadbaskets to fall into import reliance, furthering debt and aggravating economic predicaments, with a range of possible reverberations.

However, participants stressed that blue solutions are not at odds with other economic and geopolitical policies but would rather contribute to spurring growth and improving conditions on several fronts. They underscored the importance of fiscal incentives for both the public and private sector to engage responsibly and beneficially with regards to water. Such initiatives hold the potential of stimulating job growth while building environmentally sustainable practices.

Out of the conversation, a set of recommendations was put forward, against the backdrop of each participant's distinct perspective:

- ❖ **Improve intersectoral collaboration:** between academia, donors, governments, media, private sector, and others to streamline water solutions drawing on existing technical and practical knowledge.
- ❖ Support work to **ameliorate governance**, making it more inclusive and transparent, to safeguard the human right to water.
- ❖ **Decentralize water management** to promote a sense of ownership and responsibility among local communities.
- ❖ Develop mechanisms to **create fiscal incentives** for decision-makers to act on the water scarcity.
- ❖ **Facilitate and support water diplomacy**, with emphasis on repeated informal diplomatic encounters to enhance mutual understanding of needs, concerns, and perspectives.
- ❖ Support work to enhance the **environmental perspective in education** in and about the MENA region (on all levels, including research).
- ❖ **Collect data, local knowledge, and stories on a platform** for people in the region. This would give access to a range of knowledge (in local languages) and would benefit policy- and decision-makers, journalists, and other actors.
- ❖ **Use storytelling in reporting on climate and water** to convey messages and give voice to regional water issues and affected communities more effectively.