

Cooperation with Religious Authorities to Save Water

Summary

Aridity, population growth, refugee problems and climate change – Jordan's water-related problems are immense. What can be done to ease this water crisis?

As the majority of people in the Middle East are Muslims and religious leaders are accepted as moral authorities by the society, the project sought the help of these leaders to motivate people towards a more rational use of the limited water resources.

The aim of the 'Improvement of Communal Water Efficiency through Cooperation with Religious Authorities' project, which is being implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), is to spread the message of water awareness and water conservation in cooperation with religious authorities at a national, institutional and local level.

Imams and 'female preachers', which are known as *waithat*, will be trained as water ambassadors to raise water awareness and learn how to best include water awareness in preaching and moral instruction at mosques. The project will cooperate with the Ministry of Education to develop a teaching unit for religious instruction in secondary schools. Around three million people attend the weekly Friday sermons at Jordan's mosques (Fig. 1). This audience will be reached through sermons developed and issued by the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs and Holy Places (MoIA), which explains the need to save water from a religious standpoint. In addition, public awareness campaigns on different media channels shall be synchronised with the above-mentioned religious activities to achieve the maximum possible

public outreach. The project also launched the 'Blue Mosques Initiative' in Jordan to convert mosques into 'blue mosques'. These mosques will combine rainwater harvesting, water reuse and the installation of water-saving devices to serve as good water practices.

Challenge

Jordan is one of the most arid countries in the world. The scarcity of water resources is aggravated through strong **population growth, economic development**, the in-migration of more than 800,000 **Syrian and Iraqi refugees** and the **impacts of climate change**.

The strong increase in the number of refugees has a significant impact on drinking water supplies and wastewater disposal for the entire population. Communities located close to the Syrian border in the Northern and Middle Governorates are particularly affected. Water utilities are facing difficulties in providing water to the increased number of people and responding to the needs of the affected communities. Water scarcity is considered as a potential source of conflict between refugees and host communities.

According to personal interview surveys, a majority of Jordanians (52%) and Syrian refugees (58%) consider the water problem in Jordan as 'critical'. However this perception has hardly been converted into concrete action. In the same survey, only 30% of respondents stated that they are regularly using simple water saving methods in their households.



Fig. 1 (l): Mosque in Amman

Fig. 2 (r): Imam Dr Rabiah Al Aide preaching at Al-Hamshari Mosque, Khalda, Amman



Fig. 3 (l): Participants in a project workshop with religious leaders and other stakeholders

Fig. 4 (r): Believer doing ablution

The central question was therefore how to reach the hearts of the people in order to motivate them to act in an ethically and rationally sound manner.

More than 95% of the Jordanian population and Syrian refugees in Jordan are **Muslims** and **religious leaders have a great influence** on the formation of public opinion (Fig. 2).

A new approach of this project was therefore to achieve behavioural change with regard to water among the Jordanian population and Syrian refugees alike, using religious argumentation and preaching. The common Islamic beliefs of the host communities and Syrian refugees provide a framework for addressing both groups at the same time, regardless of personal background, through the same religious channels, for example mosques.

The project team and the University of Jordan are developing teaching units for universities to explain the Islamic perspective on water and the religious value of water conservation. These units will help future imams and *waitthat* to learn about the important aspects of water efficiency for local communities (Fig. 3).

There is growing interest among Islamic scholars to deal with the topic of water scarcity because water plays a central role in Islam. It is part of creation, guarantees the ritual purity of Muslims for prayers and is an important resource that secures survival and therefore must be protected.

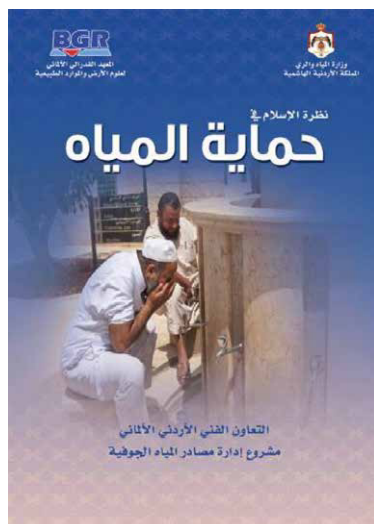


Fig. 5: Brochure for religious leaders in Jordan on efficient water use, published in cooperation between MoIA, Amman and BGR, Hannover

Setup

This project aims at fostering cooperation between the Ministry of Water and Irrigation, the Water Authority of Jordan and the water utilities on the one side, and the MoIA on the other. Teams comprising members from the water sector and the MoIA are working together on the training material for imams and *waitthat*. This material, which combines scientific argumentation supported by a religious perspective as well as practical water-saving solutions, will generate more impact than any of those elements alone.

The same approach is also applied in the development of **awareness material** and messages in information campaigns to be held during Ramadan, religious feasts or important seasons for the water sector. For instance, a large awareness campaign was launched at the beginning of the rainy season in the host communities to remind people of the traditional technique of **rainwater harvesting**. Social media, including the most famous social network in Jordan (Facebook), plays a special role in the awareness approach. Awareness is being raised in a very cost-effective manner through interactive solutions using the media and other channels. The largest public audience in the Middle East gathers at the **weekly Friday sermons**. In Jordan around 3 million people attend these Friday sermons at Jordan's mosques. This audience will be reached through six sermons developed and issued by MoIA during the project, which explain the necessity of water conservation from a religious standpoint.

To ensure the social participation of women, the project works with female Islamic scholars, or *waitthat*. *Waitthat* are in direct contact with women at the local level. Strengthening the role of these female religious scholars as mediators in dealing with the Syrian refugees as well as water ambassadors will improve the social participation of women in the community.

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Opportunities

Many people can be sensitised in mosques and during religious instruction by drawing on their beliefs and religious perceptions on resources and water conservation. Mosques are the ideal place to spread water awareness to significant portions of the Jordanian population.

In addition mosques have great potential to save or harvest water for the benefit of the people in Jordan. Water is used in mosques mainly for **ablution**. Ablution is obligatory in Islam and must be carried out prior to the five daily prayers for Muslims (Fig. 4). Many believers in Jordan keep the faucet open while doing ablution and in doing so they use up to 25 litres each time. The annual water consumption of the mosques in greater Amman is above 500,000,000 litres, which means there is great potential for water savings.

Outlook

Lessons Learned: The project “Improvement of Communal Water Efficiency through Cooperation with Religious Authorities” is demonstrating, that it is possible to spread the message of water awareness and water saving in addressing religious authorities at national, institutional and local level.

Transferability: This example of a ‘best practice’ is definitely well transferable to most Arab countries. The teaching material and the material developed for public awareness campaigns can be used (after adaptation to local/national conditions) in other Arab countries. Two preconditions are (1) the readiness of the respective ministries to collaborate; and (2) the willingness of the imams and *waithat* to include these messages in their sermons.

Decision makers in the relevant ministries should take the initiative to come together, discuss the local/national frameworks for implementation and try to put the decisions into practice. Collaboration with civil society, the media (TV, radio, print media, social networks), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international agencies is advisable to form a broader, solid basis for implementation.

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