



The World's Most Water Stressed Region Requires Cooperation and Diplomacy

Policy Issue

The MENA region faces extreme water scarcity and land degradation. The biophysical environment is deteriorating, and the soil is losing its productive capacity. The region is the world's most water-stressed, and desertification directly affects 17 countries. Sustainable Development Goal 15 aims to "Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss." Confronting regional inequalities and transboundary political challenges is central to achieving this goal.

If you have the land, you have all things, and if you lose the land, you lose everything." Today in Sudan, approximately 16 out of 18 states are facing desertification. Moreover, water scarcity affects communities unevenly: some areas have water resources, others have little access to the Nile and its tributaries, and many have no access to fresh water at all.

Oman also suffers from desertification, as 80 percent of the country is desert. "Most of the farm area is reducing," explained Al-Zeidi, "We are suffering from the death of vegetation." In addition, the country relies on a traditional irrigation system (Aflaj), and more than one thousand have dried up in recent years.



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The Context

Alternative Policy Solutions (APS) at the *American University in Cairo* and the **Governance and Local Development Institute (GLD)** at the *University of Gothenburg* held a Policy Roundtable on 12 October to discuss land degradation and water scarcity in the Middle East and North Africa, MENA, region. Participants included **Dr. Eyad Yacoub** – Center of Excellence for Climate Change and Environmental Technologies, *Arab American University*; **Mohamed Salih Dafalla** –Faculty of Agriculture, *University of Khartoum*; **Nadim Farajalla** – Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, *American University in Beirut*; and **Khalifa Al-Zeidi** – Center for Environmental Studies and Research, *Sultan Qaboos University*.

Land Degradation and Water Scarcity

Salih outlined land's social and material importance for local communities, "The dignity of people is tied to land.

Lebanon's "breadbasket" of the region is also gone. Urban expansion has been significant, and 80 percent of Lebanese now live in urban areas. "We are building right next to the mountains and building right up to the forests," said Farajalla, "We are getting forest fires." Coastal aquifers are also turning salty, the water table is dropping, and the frequency of rain is shifting seasons. Drought is threatening agriculture in Palestine, and farmers have been forced into serious debt. Farmers are often forced to lease land or give it up, while many others have fled to Israel for more economic opportunities.

Conflict Over Scarce Resources

Resource scarcity contributes to intense competition over land and water. Environmental stresses exacerbate underlying land insecurities due to historical grievances and institutional weakness. These tensions have contributed to conflicts in Kordofan and Darfur in Sudan, as well as emerging tensions between rural and urban areas and host populations and migrants.

Environmental pressures are also contributing to conflict between Syrian migrants and host populations in Lebanon. Some residents say that when Lebanese drive tractors to the watering hole to pump water, Syrians gang up on them and prevent them from filling up. “Syrian farmers have drilled lots of wells, leaving Lebanese farmers perceiving that they are at a disadvantage,” explained Farajalla. The growing Syrian population has expanded into the metals and mechanics sector, contributing to new economic competition and tensions. These tensions are often exacerbated by international donors who make policies without considering the realities on the ground.

Transboundary Politics

Countries are trying technical solutions like water desalination, cloud seeding, wastewater reuse, underground recharge dams, and water savings programs. Yet, perhaps more importantly, water management is a cross-border challenge that requires regional cooperation and diplomacy. However, “In this part of the world, there is no hybrid diplomacy,” Farajalla argued, “It is all hydro-hegemony.” Powerful countries like Turkey and Israel have used water as a strategic asset to advance their national interests.

Sudan has been dealing with water shortages for many years. It is part of the Nile Basin Initiative, bringing together 10 African countries to manage water use and develop infrastructure. The Nile basin initiative has had successes but is beset by poor relations between countries that have undermined cooperation.

Today, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has intensified disagreements between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan over water use in the Nile. There is also a need for diplomacy between Libya, Chad, Sudan, and Egypt in governing groundwater aquifers. As Salih explained, “There is a need for internal adjustment and internal new practices. People in Sudan are not using the water in an efficient way.”



Photo Credit: Nile Basin Initiative

Researchers play an important role in developing new technologies, explaining conditions of cooperation, and raising awareness among negotiators. Overcoming land degradation and water scarcity is an urgent multi-sectoral and cross-boundary political challenge.

Full Policy Rountable, Recorded via Zoom and published via YouTube, [watch here](#).

About GLD

The Governance and Local Development Institute (GLD) is a research institute based at the University of Gothenburg, originally founded in 2013 at Yale University by Professor Ellen Lust. GLD focuses on the local factors driving governance and development. The institute is dedicated to international collaboration and scientifically rigorous, policy-relevant research in an effort to promote human welfare globally. Findings are made available to the international and domestic communities through academic publications, policy briefs, public presentations, and social media, as well as on-the-ground workshops in cooperation with local partners.



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