

Concept Note

Towards Social Cohesion: Sustainable Water Financing in Conflict

World Water Week 2021: Presenter, Mukta M Dhere, Research Associate, Geo Expertise

About Geo Expertise:

Geo Expertise has successfully implemented water management and rehabilitation projects, hydrogeological surveys, and negotiation processes across four countries: Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and Niger. The organization specializes in developing and re-establishing water supply networks and adapting to new governance mechanisms in conflict societies by strengthening the local communities. This case study is an outcome of a research partnership with the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, contributing to the literature on 'water for peacebuilding'.

Unpacking the Project

Water financing challenges amplify a million times more in a conflict society. In addition to the usual challenges of water financing, one of the disastrous consequences of the Syrian conflict is that the social contract between Syrians now tends to be a social contract of violence. This project did a detailed analysis of the water-society relations and the post-conflict social structure at the local level in the implementation of water projects in the Afrin area, in north-western Syria. It identified the unifying role of water in the Syrian society as water is a basic need used by all and a neutral substance for all. This project was hence built on the pillars of participatory resource governance, community interaction, capacity building, and creating newer social spaces.

Stakeholders

Seven **Water User Associations** were created by Geo Expertise including both the local and displaced populations. They oversaw an appropriate and realistic policy of distribution of drinking water among the beneficiaries at the household level, as well as the establishment of a system of financial contributions in line with the economic conditions of the beneficiaries. **Geo Expertise** initiated the set-up of these associations and provided initial financial resources, and training, and capacity-building workshops. The **local community** was engaged in the resource governance process either as representatives of the Water User Associations or as volunteers in the maintenance and cost-recovery processes.

Our Model

We have developed a strategy with the Water Users' Associations ensuring the alternation - complementary between the financing of NGOs operating in the area, and the contribution of beneficiaries. Most water supply network projects fail because when the NGOs leave the area of operation, they lack the funds and resources to keep the infrastructure up and running. This

model tackles this very issue by ensuring that the project remains sustainable and self-sufficient even in the absence of an external governing body.

Step 1: Creation of a Savings Contingency Fund

Along with the Water User Associations, we created a Savings Contingency Fund (SCF) with the charges collected from the beneficiaries during the initial months of project implementation. This fund was a result of the accumulation of water fees as the organization paid the operational costs for 3 months to demonstrate the viability of water supply networks and to allow the Water User Associations to establish an initial cash flow. This fund acts as a buffer, ensuring the alternation between receiving more funding from NGOs and cost recovery of the fees from the beneficiaries.

Step 2: The Principle of Solidarity

The collection of fees from the beneficiaries is based on the principle of solidarity, that is the economically marginalized families have been exempted from the water fee payment. The fees are set at 2,000 Syrian Pounds, (that is 2 dollars) per month, per household, and it is estimated that 5% of households would not pay the fee due to their economic situation. The implementation of water management by the Water User Associations, which includes displaced and local people takes into consideration the principle of solidarity, the equity of sharing, and the accountability of beneficiaries concerning water, which has led to a reduction in tensions between local and displaced beneficiaries over water sharing and strengthened the ties between beneficiaries.

Step 3: Cost Recovery & Self Sufficiency

The Water User Associations then resort to the SCF, which is replenished every month with the cost-recovery mechanism from 95% of beneficiaries. In the absence of a financing body or organization, the Water Users' Associations resort to this savings fund to finance the operation of the stations, ensuring the self-sufficiency (that is repairs, maintenance, and functioning) of the community water supply networks. In case further infrastructure development is needed, the Water Users' Associations and the village mayors and local committees contact NGOs operating in the area for further financial assistance.

Our Contribution to the Roadmap

From the lessons we learned, this model can be scaled to other fragile contexts, and we urge organizations to:

- ❖ Plan their exit strategies and ensure a systematic handover of operations
- ❖ Involve and engage the local community in the resource governance process, which can help create new social spaces and help in achieving cohesion
- ❖ And lastly, build on the existing knowledge and methods and build capacities to ensure the self-sufficiency of water projects.

Source: [A. Haj Asaad, M. Dhere, R. Jaubert, 2020, "Water for Basic Needs and Social Cohesion in Syria", Geo Expertise & IHEID, Geneva](#)

