

Forum 2000 Conference: Exploring Water Patterns in the Middle East

The Forum 2000 Foundation's initiative "Exploring Water Patterns in the Middle East" (EWaP), which started in 2006, runs under the auspices of Hassan bin Talal of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and former President Václav Havel of the Czech Republic. With EWaP, Forum 2000 addresses a key problem that is particularly severe in the Middle East, namely water resources. The region is extremely arid, its five percent of the world's population being matched by only one percent of freshwater resources. It has low rainfall and virtually all available water resources have already been utilized in the last decades, including building dams, drilling, pumping of groundwater, and seawater desalination. The Red-Dead Sea Project and Turkey's Manavgat River are two of only a handful of proposals for matching water to population growth and groundwater depletion in the region.

Water in the Middle East is also of crucial importance for the region's neighbors, including Europe because water has become a subject of international relations with significant security, economic, social, and humanitarian implications. Moreover, the gravity of the issue is such that it is listed in the 7th Millennium Development Goal, which calls for nations to "reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water."

The morning panel, "Securing Water Supplies in the Middle East - Funding and Policy Alternatives," offered Turkish, Jordanian, Palestinian, and Israeli perspectives on the necessary funding and policy steps to be taken in order to secure water supplies for future generations. **Munther Haddadin**, former Minister of Water & Irrigation for Jordan, used his opportunity as keynote speaker to paint a broad picture of the water situation in the region while acquainting the audience with a few esoteric terms from the field, such as "shadow water," "green water" and "blue water." He opined that ministers in the region can still take major steps toward maximizing blue water and better managing green water. Furthermore, steps can be taken to process more wastewater and drainage water for reuse. He emphasized the relationship between water and energy, a point that was heard several times during both of the day's panels. On a final note, Haddadin counseled that funding go toward the exploration and efficient use of water resources through build-operate-transfer (or public-private partnerships) and regional projects.

Murad Jabay Bino of the Jordanian non-profit, Inter-Islamic Network on Water Resources Development and Management (INWRDAM), and **Shimon Tal**, former Water Minister of Israel, reiterated Haddadin's call for an expansion of water resources. "We should do a study of every crazy idea of how to increase the water supply in the region," Tal said. He later suggested that an international organization be set up, whose set goal is to attract private investors to deliver the necessary funds to improve and build-up infrastructure and compensate for the already-strained national budgets. "The private sector is the only sector that can bring the necessary changes to infrastructure," Tal said.

Other notable words came from **Aaron Wolf**, Associate Professor, Oregon State University, who expressed his outrage concerning the lack of social awareness about water. "People are drinking poison water...dig deep and find the outrage within yourself," Wolf said. **Nader Khateeb**, Director, Friends of the Earth, Palestine, agreed with Wolf and, furthermore, stated that wealthy countries, especially Israel, should play a larger role in funding water scarcity relief and facilitating water exportation across the region.

In conclusion, the panelists stated the region must first address the fundamental question of whether water is a commodity that can be traded and exported.

In the afternoon, professionals from government, academia, business, law and the non-profit sector joined under the banner, "Responsible Water Management - Water Risks in the 21st Century." **Graham MacKay**, CEO of SABMiller, talked about his company's stance toward water. Brewing companies were traditionally built astride the cleanest sources of water and remain heavily dependent on potable water to this day. SABMiller, for instance, uses 100 billion liters on an annual basis. Over the years SABMiller has reduced the water input for a single bottle of beer by 25 percent. "But once you get down below a certain level it becomes a matter of diminishing returns," MacKay said. This is due to the rising costs of energy that make the effort counterproductive. Further steps that can be taken include managing use upstream among suppliers - 55 liters of water irrigates the barley required for one liter of beer - and downstream among consumers.

In her speech, **Miriam Balaban**, Secretary General of the European Desalination Society, urged people from all different walks of life and varied professions to get involved in the attempt to reach sustainable solutions. For the management of water has become a more complicated issue as many of the influential factors are constantly undergoing change. Therefore, this issue must be effectively planned and handled not only at the European level, but on a worldwide scale with the cooperation of both private entities and the public.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Environment of the Czech Republic, **Martin Bursík**, talked about the influences of water shortages in different continents and how, for example, two thirds of the water supply is inefficiently being used for agriculture. He stressed that water management and consumption should be economically planned and that international cooperation is necessary.

Referring to previous research studies done in parts of Africa, **Mats Karlsson**, World Bank, pointed out that water and energy as interdependent issues may be most efficiently addressed through the active involvement of local communities and the close collaboration of international communities. Having a clear structure of management, such as monitoring systems and increasing the sense of responsibility of the people through direct participation, has led to a better use of the scarce capital.

Concluding remarks were given by **Jitzhak Alster**, Israeli attorney. Alster commented that the most effective means to best resolve water shortages is by reaching a "practical solution" that is incorporative and creative. International water law has been discussed since the 1966 Helsinki agreement, but the question of reasonable measures and allocations have yet to be resolved.

EWaP would like to thank Coca Cola Czech Republic and the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their kind support in 2007.