

»» Water, crises and conflicts: how these interrelate and the need for action using the Middle East as an example

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Water is vital for sustaining life and is just as important for the population as it is for the economic development of a country. However, the availability and access to water as a resource is limited because only about 2.5% of global water occurrences is drinking water and this is not uniformly distributed across the globe. In arid and semi-arid regions such as the Middle East, which is already stricken by complicated conflict dynamics and crises, "water stress" is a politically controversial and relevant topic.

Water shortage is a factor in conflicts and a cause of crises

When resources become scarcer or the demand for them increases, this almost always leads to a rise in conflicts among the groups competing for them. Distribution conflicts between neighbouring countries situated on the banks of cross-border rivers, such as the Jordan and Euphrates rivers, clearly show how common access to drinking water can become an issue about territorial rights and political power. Internal conflicts within countries can frequently arise or be exacerbated through a shortage or unequal distribution of water resources when, for example, migration causes the demand for water to increase in the countries that take in these migrants.

Not only the availability of water resources, but how they are managed harbours crisis potential: when the necessary mechanisms are not in place, additional water stress during periods of drought or economic shock can cause frustration towards the state on the part of the population. The perceived distrust in the ability of state structures to ensure a country's own basic supply of water was one of the factors behind protests in the Middle East. In Syria, for example, a period of drought due to the lack of adaptation strategies and years of mismanagement of water resources led to

an agricultural crisis and endangered the basic provision of water for the population.

However, water conflicts are not always entirely about water resources but are caused by more profound factors such as the threat to one's own existence or the loss of power or territory. In the Middle East conflict, for example, the unequal distribution of water resources between the Palestinian territories and Israel is loaded with corresponding narrative. In this light, any negotiations or compromises reached on this topic would be seen as a loss of control and existential threat.

Exacerbation of water shortage through political conflict

In armed conflicts, water infrastructure is a popular target of attacks in order to demonstrate and consolidate power by threatening the enemy's existence. Air strikes on water reservoirs in Yemen and Syria are good examples of how conflicts can cut off the water supply. Serious supply bottlenecks are the result, worsening the humanitarian situation of the population.

Migration caused by conflicts also has negative repercussions on the water supply. The flight of specialists from conflict regions can lead to the failure of state institutions and utilities. This lack of specialists can also be caused by parts of the country being seized by armed groups or by the state being unable to pay salaries in acute crisis situations.

Water management as an instrument of conflict management

Especially in conflicts about distribution among countries neighbouring rivers, water can also make a contribution towards resolving conflicts. Regulating water usage by drawing up corresponding contracts is first and foremost an

adaptation strategy for a scarce resource. But the common management of water resources also serves as a platform for (political) dialogue and de-escalation. Therefore, water management is explicitly mentioned in a number of peace processes, for example the Oslo II peace process.

The same has been observed in post-conflict situations. When an armed conflict has come to an end, returning refugees settle first in areas where water resources are available and they often prefer these places to their prior homes. This is why rebuilding of water infrastructure should take high priority to guarantee a basic supply for the returning population and contribute in this way to long-term rehabilitation.

Conclusion: Approaches for development cooperation

Many factors influence the extent to which crises and conflicts can be cushioned through a functioning water supply. The strengthening of institutional capacities and the political system, the implementation of fair water distribution patterns and the quality and capacity of water management are approaches that can strengthen robust structures in crisis-stricken countries in the long term. By providing or rehabilitating water infrastructure, conflicts among refugees and the communities absorbing them can be reduced, perspectives can be created for returning refugees and the humanitarian situation of the population in general can be improved. ■