



Distr.  
LIMITED

E/DESA/DSD/2018/WG  
18 June 2018  
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

**Department of Economic and Social Affairs**  
**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia**

## Report

### **Symposium on Women and Water Security for Peacebuilding in the Arab Region Beirut, 9-10 May 2018**

#### Summary

The United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, in collaboration with the Pacific Water Research Centre of Simon Fraser University, organized the *Symposium on Women and Water Security for Peacebuilding in the Arab Region* at the United Nations House in Beirut from 9 to 10 May 2018.

The main objectives of the meeting were to: (a) Review and advance the emerging water security gender nexus in the Arab region in the context of current geopolitical considerations; (b) Strengthen the national capacities of the Arab region to integrate water security and gender approaches in their national plans and strategies; (c) Develop ways in which women can be recognized as agents of change; this will include approaches that can help surpass stereotypes of women's role in water security, especially women refugees, and women head of households, and help bring about true behavioural and policy changes; (d) Formulate actionable recommendations for mainstreaming gender in policy planning and implementation of water policies at the community level including refugee communities; (e) Community mobilization, with an aim to achieving positive health outcomes through improved knowledge and implementation of better hygiene practices; and (f) Modelling inclusion of women to serve as interlocutors in times of conflicts and in enhancing conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction.

Several recommendations were made during the discussions, which advance the need to pursue water security for all, from the individual and community level to the national and inter-state levels, as well as in formal and informal sectors, and the challenges faced by women in this regard. Also addressed were the need to increase the engagement of women in water sector projects; recognize the linkages that affect women in the area of water, peace and security within the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; respond to the varied challenges facing women in accessing water and sanitation in national action plans and humanitarian assistance programmes; promote gender mainstreaming in national water policies; encourage cooperation on water as a tool for collaboration; improve governance to foster greater women's participation in water management; strengthen educational opportunities and training for women in technical fields and the pursuit of science-based degrees; engage women in the formulation of legislation and water-related institutions; and empower

women to become agents of change in the Arab region.

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## **Introduction**

1. The United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in collaboration with the Pacific Water Research Centre of Simon Fraser University, organized the *Symposium on Women and Water Security for Peacebuilding in the Arab Region* at the United Nations House in Beirut, Lebanon, from 9 to 10 May 2018.
2. This report reviews the main points raised during the discussions.

## **I. RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **A. RECOMMENDATIONS AND FINDINGS**

3. Actionable recommendations and findings for mainstreaming the concerns facing women in pursuing water security and contributing to peacebuilding in the Arab region are as follows:
  - (a) Access to clean and adequate water and sanitation is a human right, which must be protected for all during times of conflict, occupation and unrest;
  - (b) Recognizing the interlinkages that affect women, water, peace and security can help in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through national action plans and humanitarian assistance programmes;
  - (c) Increasing the involvement of women in decision-making positions in the water sector can be improved by enhancing training opportunities and targeting women for higher level positions;
  - (d) Raising awareness about water insecurity challenges facing women at the community, national and regional levels should be considered as part of gender mainstreaming policies to help empower women to become agents of change;
  - (e) Women are often responsible for water-related activities in the household, yet they do not always have the authority to make decisions regarding water purchases, use and allocation decisions. This sometimes translates to water and sanitation not being prioritized in households and communities where women do not have a voice. Involving women in economic decision-making, planning and monitoring can thus improve access to water and sanitation and ensure sustainability and saving of water, thus generating multiplier benefits for health and welfare;
  - (f) Gender mainstreaming should be used to ensure that water and peacebuilding related policies, plans and programmes consider the problems and needs in the different roles, access to resources and engagement in decision-making processes that exist between women and men, as well as girls and boys;
  - (g) Cross-sectoral communication and coordination, as well as greater engagement and consideration of women's concerns as a heterogeneous group, through improved governance is needed to better address women's participation in water management;
  - (h) Challenging gender norms is often difficult to create policies around, as it is important to find ways to encourage women in leadership to support other women in overcoming social stigmas of successful women as well as confining traditional roles for women in order to aim for sustainable transformation amidst periods of conflict, occupation and transition;

- (i) Strengthening educational opportunities and training for women in technical fields and science-based degrees and engaging and empowering women through the adoption or the revision of legislation;
- (j) Promoting cooperation on water as a tool for collaboration and an instrument of peace;
- (k) Encouraging the formation and implementation of policies that uphold UNSC 1325 on women, peace and security. Women should be included in conflict resolution since the early inception phases and solutions should be formulated to address the needs of women;
- (l) Re-evaluating policies that create unequal land ownership legal structures to ensure gender equality and empower women economically by increasing access to credit and collateral;
- (m) Enhancing cooperation between countries with shared water resources to ensure mutual benefits;
- (n) Facilitating regional exchange of women’s success stories in water management and water diplomacy;
- (o) Securing funding to address research gaps at the intersection of women and water security to provide evidence based decision-making for policies; and
- (p) Developing and promoting solutions to increase women’s involvement in water management that are specific to the cultural context of the Arab region and that aim for social transformation and focus on promoting changes in social relations and power structures.

## **II. DISCUSSION TOPICS**

### **A. CASE STUDIES FROM THE ARAB REGION**

4. Ms. Mehrinaz El Awady, Centre for Women Director at ESCWA, provided background information on the role of women in water collection, which can take many hours every day. However, there is a significant lack of data related to water safety and gender related interlinkages.

5. Ms. Layla Lutf Al-Thour, President of SAM Organization for Rights and Development in Yemen, presented via Skype on “Women and Water in Yemen under Conditions of Conflict”. Women representing the dissenting communities have succeeded, where men have failed, in ending 15 years of animosity through consultation. They reached an agreement on the sharing of the well water resources and were also involved in what was perceived as a man only activity in terms of financial management and rehabilitation of the well. She recommended that the international community extend further support to enable women to be on the frontline in decision-making processes in addition to empowering women on an economic level to decrease displacement and reduce the amount of people moving to urban cities.

6. During the discussion, participants highlighted the need for international and local organizations to empower women especially in armed conflict. Success factors include community acceptance and flexible communication methods.

7. Ms. Ghada Alamily, General Director of Almada group for Media, Culture and Arts in Iraq discussed “Water Security in Iraqi Refugee Camps”. She provided insights to the challenges facing displaced Iraqi women due to the conflict with ISIS and severe water scarcity. Untreated contaminated drinking water supplies in Iraq have contributed to the spread of water-related epidemics such as cholera. She also addressed the role of women in water supply, WASH related risks women face, and the lack of government coordination in fulfilling the needs of internally displaced Iraqis, of which women make up 51 per cent.

8. Ms. Reem Al Rawashdeh from Al Rai Newspaper presented on “Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon”. She discussed water scarcity in Jordan where the water allowance in Za’atari refugee camp is 35 m<sup>3</sup> per person, below that of 120m<sup>3</sup> per person in the capital Amman. Furthermore, there are concerns with the quality of groundwater that has traces of wastewater. The Red-Dead Sea Project seeks to address water security concerns by building a desalination plant which will bring an additional 85 million m<sup>3</sup> of water to Jordan, as well as stabilize the shrinking Dead Sea.

9. Ms. Manal Tamimi, Field Researcher at Women’s Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling, delivered a presentation on “Human Rights, Women and Access to Water in the State of Palestine”. She indicated that the effects of the Israeli occupation of Palestine have heightened water insecurity in the West Bank. In Nabi Saleh, there are approximately 600 inhabitants with five nearby water sources which are controlled by Israel. Because Palestinian women are responsible for managing water in the household, they are affected by the occupying forces’ control of their water supplies which are deemed by Israel as ‘holy water’. Villagers receive water once a week for twelve hours at night and Palestinian women would stay up all night to do the household chores requiring water supply.

10. It was noted during the discussion that part of Palestinian resistance is trying to change the opinions of the West to redress the image of Palestinian women as victims and promote women’s self-esteem and self-confidence in the region. Participants discussed efforts in Jordan to create associations with women’s organizations to build household wells and increase women’s skills, which can empower women economically in new socially acceptable roles such as a plumber.

#### B. SDG 3 AND SDG 5 NEXUS: LINKING GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING TO GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT

11. Ms. Nohal Al Homsy, Environmental Health Officer at the World Health Organization (WHO) in Lebanon, presented “Access to WASH Services in the Arab Region” on behalf of Mr. Hamed Bakir, Coordinator for Environmental Health Interventions at the WHO Centre for Environmental Health Activities in Jordan. She discussed the unfinished sanitation and clean drinking water agenda (SDG 6.2 and SDG 6.1 respectively) in the Arab region and provided an overview of data collected from the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) Snapshot. Only two countries in the Arab region are on track for universal basic water by 2030, while progress is too slow in 10 countries and basic water services are decreasing in three countries.

12. Mr. Osman Hussein Abubaker, General Director of the Almassar Organization, was not able to present at his selected time due to his travel schedule.

13. Ms. Karen Assaf, at the Arab Scientific Institute for Research and Transfer of Technology discussed “Ensure Healthy Lives and Promote Well-being for All at All Ages”. She noted the interlinkages between SDG 6 and SDG 3 because increasing access to clean water and sanitation is essential to ensuring healthy lives and promoting wellbeing. In the Arab context, she noted that the most important need in the health sector is the need for secure access to needed health facilities. Furthermore, she recommended a defined and published basic needs package required for enhanced living conditions in Palestine, which includes a secured water supply and reachable health services.

14. Ms. Nedjma Koval Saifi, Founding Partner and CEO of Integrated International in Jordan, presented “Advancing Gender Equality and Empower for Enhanced Water Security”. Using the Jordan Valley Case Study, she highlighted how women do not always have decision-making authority on key water purchase, use, efficiency and allocation issues. She also presented a case study on the Mafraq region of Jordan in which residents spent up to 6.9 per cent of their income on water utilities and an additional 30 per cent of their income to buy water to fill the deficit from intermittent water supply. She highlighted the non-traditional household water manager roles women had taken on such as plumbers and household water auditors in becoming agents of change for their community.

15. During the discussion, participants noted that lack of economic opportunities is a large barrier to improving women's water performance in water security. In Palestine, women who take on loans are not able to focus on resisting the occupation because of their debt. In Jordan, loans that target women depend on collateral, which not many women have due to unequal land ownership legal structures. Participants also discussed water quality in Jordan where water tankers provide more expensive and unregulated water to households. Women who take on new roles in water management have gained social acceptance and within the cultural context, these roles are open only to women.

16. Ms. Luna Abu Swaireh, Director General for Arab Unity Studies in Lebanon, discussed the need for appointing women as leaders in the Arab region. She highlighted her experience of using funding to address the local needs by support income generating skills training projects in Gaza.

### C. SDG 6: CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION FOR ALL

17. Ms. Maria Saldarriaga, Assistant Professor and Chair at the American University of Iraq Sulaimani, delivered a presentation on "Women and WASH: Empowering Women by Engaging at the Community Level". She indicated that within displaced communities in Kurdistan, ethnicity and culture can act as constraints to using communal facilities for sanitation and bathing. Regional water security is challenged by reliance on emergency planning and infrastructure, hydrological dependency, centralization and lack of institutionalization, and homogenization of local practices. In order for women to become agents of change, value generation, collaboration within families, women's support, governance and local expert integration, systems and resilience approach, and education efforts need to be expanded.

18. Ms. Soumaya Ibrahim, independent consultant on gender and development, discussed "Gender issues to consider when seeking to ensure water availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all". She indicated that the ripple effects of water management interventions that were carried out in the governorate of Fayoum over the last twenty years were felt on the macro, meso, and micro levels. In Fayoum, the Branch Canal Water User Association required a percentage of women in its Board of Directors and Representative Assembly which allowed for women to become increasingly accepted in agricultural tasks in an active role rather than a complimentary one. Furthermore, women's involvement in farmer's field schools allowed for them to be admitted to public spaces and increased women's status and dignity within the household. Several gaps on all levels however need to be addressed, such as: on the Macro level, gender neutral policies and regulations; on the meso level, in institutions, the rigid occupational sex segregation in water user associations; on the community level, the cultural understandings of gender roles promoting the reiteration of stereotypes, thus placing further restrictions on women and men alike; and on the micro level, the individual, the female's false consciousness. To mainstream gender in policy planning and implementation of water policies at the community level, it is recommended to provide training for water board members and community members, raise awareness to combat gender-biased stereotypes, design programs that aim for social transformation and encourage political will through supporting high-level political commitment.

19. Mr. Walid Saleh, Chief Technical Advisor of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Yemen, presented "Women, Water User Associations and Water Security in Yemen". He noted that land and water conflicts have led to 4,000 deaths, yet conflict resolution over land and water disputes has allowed for peaceful solutions when both parties understand their respective rights. Respect for traditional knowledge, cultural institutions, and individual welfare is critical for international organizations working in Yemen. Furthermore, he discussed fifty women farmers, all university graduates, who approached FAO for advice on creating a Water User Association.

20. Ms. Suheir Raies, Head of the Syria Coast Society for Environment Protection, discussed "Community and household level challenges facing women accessing water services under current Syrian conditions". She indicated that repercussions from the war in Syria undermined water planning such as inactive wells, discontinuation of WASH projects, and increased water pollution. In 2016, ESCWA assisted

in a project to improve water supplies and sanitation for eleven targeted villages but was implemented in only one village due to security reasons.

#### D. VOICES OF WOMEN FROM THE FIELD

21. Ms. Nina Nichols from Simon Fraser University discussed the highlights from Day 1: Women are disproportionately responsible for water provision. Clean and adequate water is a human right. In the Arab region, lack of strong institutions necessitates assistance from outside agencies and countries with shared water resources need to cooperate.

22. Ms. Stephanie Chaban, Social Affairs Officer at the Centre for Women from ESCWA, continued the highlights from Day 1: There is a general lack of planning around water security in the region, which is exacerbated by conflict and insecurity. What policies do exist are gender blind or neutral which obfuscate women's already substantial involvement. Case studies highlight that when women are included in water management and diplomacy, transformation happens.

23. Ms. Diala Ktaiche, WASH Officer at UNICEF, presented insights into the experiences of refugee in Lebanon. There is widespread multiple displacement as many IDPs move seasonally to find agricultural work. She noted that women have been trained on water treatment, disease and hygiene. Given the protracted crisis, there are increased probabilities of health and environmental risks, eviction, and increased social tensions between host and refugee communities.

24. Ms. Fatima Al-Jaffal, WASH Volunteer, presented her experience as a single mother of five in a refugee camp in the Bekaa valley. When using the toilet and collecting water up to 400m away, she feared for herself and her daughters as they were at risk of harassment and violence. MercyCorps provided water directly to the camps and built new toilets with septic tanks and locks. This has helped to alleviate their fears and increased their dignity and security.

25. Ms. Khater Al-Ali, WASH Volunteer, discussed her experience as a Syrian refugee living in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon. After participating in a MercyCorps training, she began teaching her community about hygiene and raising awareness about health issues. Her self-esteem has increased as a volunteer and her community has changed their perception of women working outside of the house.

26. During the discussion, it was mentioned that Lebanese host communities suffer from lack of WASH infrastructure. Sustainable solutions that support both refugees and host communities are needed.

#### E. SDG 16: PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

27. Ms. Margareta Wahlström, President of the Swedish Red Cross, discussed how the key assumptions of women as a homogeneous group needs to be reconsidered. There are cultural, political and social differences between women that need to be recognized in supporting women as agents of change.

28. Ms. Natasha Carmi, Water Advisor at the Geneva Water Hub, delivered a presentation on "Women in Water Diplomacy". She discussed the results of her recent study from questionnaires on women working in water diplomacy in the Jordan River Basin. In order to empower women, it is necessary to build capacity, develop global perspectives, overcome social stigmas about powerful women, lobby governments and universities, combine integration of SDGs in national action plans, and encourage female solidarity.

29. Mr. Francois Münger, Director of the Geneva Water Hub, presented "High Level Panel on Water and Peace – recommendations". He briefed the participants about the work undertaken by the Geneva Water Hub to prevent water-related conflict through networking, education and knowledge generation. The Geneva Water Hub focuses on fostering blue diplomacy, or using water as a tool for collaboration.



30. Ambassador Shahira Wahbi, from the Sudanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, discussed how water and women are a cultural issue in the Arab region related to education and awareness. She expressed the need for reviving traditional knowledge and incorporating customs without outside interventions. For women to have a constructive role in peacebuilding, it is necessary to have internal, familial, national, regional and international peace and security.

31. Ms. Chahra Ksai discussed her former role as Director of the League of Arab States Center for Arab Water Studies and Water Security in advising governments to establish the Arab Ministerial Water Council. Despite the sensitivity of the topic, Arab Governments agreed to establish such a ministerial council for water in 2008. In 2009, the Council met for the first time and discussed the preparation of a water security strategy, which would include consideration of transboundary water issues. She called for further collaboration in addressing these issues and for the inclusion of women as decision-makers in water diplomacy.

32. Ms. Mona Fakhri, Director of Water Resources at the Ministry of Energy and Water in Lebanon, discussed the lack of water integrity and transparency in Lebanon which exacerbate water insecurity. She recommended establishing an anti-corruption Committee, creating a National Water Council and adopting a metering system to further monitor water use. She also noted the lack of women in water management in Lebanon and the need for setting ambitious targets for women in governance and management as well as providing technical skills for women.

33. Ms. Mey Alsayegh, Communications Manager for the Ministry of State for Displaced Affairs in Lebanon, discussed the challenges of host communities in Lebanon, specifically within Aarsal. Wastewater is a main source of conflict between refugees and the host community as 30 per cent of wastewater is seeping into the soil. She recommended constructing a wastewater plant to serve both communities and decrease tension. She also noted that donors should put a precondition of including a gender perspective in all funded projects.

34. Ms. Nadine El Marouk, Head of Design and Planning Unit for Nahr El Bared Reconstruction Project Unit at the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), presented on the Nahr El Bared refugee camp, which is the second largest camp in Lebanon with more than 22,000 displaced persons after 2007. In reconstructing the destroyed areas of the camp and addressing the water issues present, UNRWA has used a participatory approach to involve women in decision-making.

35. Mr. Osman Hussein Abubaker, General Director of the Almassar Organization, presented on “Women and Water within the Frameworks of SDG 3 and SDG 5”. Water insecurity affects women and girls who are responsible for supplying their households with water and may drop out of school to do so in areas where water is not available. He noted that there is a need to increase the number of women in boards and councils governing water issues in local communities as well as increase awareness about the social and cultural roles that women can play in averting conflict.

36. Following the presentations, participants noted the importance of gender mainstreaming in policy making and to share lessons learned between countries who have implemented gender mainstreaming. Participants discussed how WASH projects should focus on men’s education and awareness about women’s needs for separate WASH facilities.

#### F. RAISING AWARENESS, ADVOCACY, AND THE MEDIA

37. Ms. Mervat Batarseh, Head of Environmental Education Section for the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) in Jordan, discussed the ties between SDG 4 and SDG 6 in integrating water issues and conservation into national curricula. The RSCN works on public awareness regarding the issues of water conservation in addition to funding interventions in water insecure communities by installing water saving devices at the household level. Using both educational and awareness programming, the RSCN seeks

to change WASH behaviours, such as hand washing. She noted that both local populations and the international community need to build awareness of water scarcity. Although donors may not find WASH projects attractive, it is important to advocate with donors to show the impacts that WASH has on other sectors.

38. Ms. Daniella Bostrom Couffe, Communications Manager at UN-Water, discussed over Skype UN-Water's campaigns for World Water Day and World Toilet Day. Using celebrities for raising awareness on World Water Day is an effective communications technique; however, raising awareness for World Toilet Day is challenging because of the taboo surrounding toilets. She highlighted the importance of using men as change agents for gender-based behaviour by building awareness through campaigns such as #heforshe.

39. During the discussion, participants noted the need to have communications materials from UN-Water that are adaptable to the Arab context.

#### G. INTEGRATING THEMES

40. Mr. Zafar Adeel reviewed the discussion questions from Day 1 and moderated a discussion involving all symposium participants. Participants discussed the following key points:

- (a) Awareness raising efforts need to include decision makers at local, national, sub-regional, regional and global levels;
- (b) Many Arab countries already have policies adapted to make women agents of change. Further attention should be paid to implementing these policies specifically in the context of the Arab region;
- (c) More funding is needed to address research gaps at the intersection of women and water security to provide evidence based decision-making for policies;
- (d) Communities need to be involved in decision-making processes regarding WASH project proposals and implementation. At the same time, donor coordination is necessary to ensure that projects are cohesive rather than redundant;
- (e) Lessons learned and challenges encountered in integrating gender and water security dimensions within the Arab region need to be shared between countries and stakeholders;
- (f) Achieving the SDGs in conflict settings must be addressed specifically;

### III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

#### A. DATE AND VENUE OF THE WORKSHOP

41. The Symposium on Women and Water Security for Peacebuilding in the Arab Region was held at the UN-House in Beirut, Lebanon from 9 to 10 May 2018.

#### B. OPENING

42. The opening session included statements by Ms. Roula Majdalani, Director, Sustainable Development Policies Division, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), Zafar Adeel, Professor at Pacific Water Research Center at Simon Fraser University, and Mr. Mohamed Ali Alhakim, Executive Secretary at ESCWA. Ms. Roula Majdalani delivered a presentation on "Women, Water and the Sustainable Development Goals in the Arab Context". She indicated that all 17

SDGs are both water-related and gender-related explicitly and implicitly, which supports the water-women-security nexus. She also explained how ESCWA supports the implementation of the SDGs and fosters consensus on regional concerns that are then transmitted to global forum through regional consultations such as the Regional Preparatory Meeting on Water Issues in March 2018 and the Arab Forum on Sustainable Development in April 2018, whose outcomes are informing the High Level Political Forum organized at the global level in July 2018.

43. Mr. Zafar Adeel, Professor at Pacific Water Research Center at Simon Fraser University, delivered an overview of “Women, Water Security and Peacebuilding in the Arab Region”. He highlighted international policies that focus on women, specifically identifying the key action clauses of UNSC Resolution 1325. He presented the evolution of thinking around women’s role as agents of change and the responses in the Arab region to fostering women as agents of change. He also addressed the knowledge gaps in understanding social and cultural contexts. He presented key questions for Symposium participants regarding utilizing the SDG framework, integration across SDGs, enabling policies for women as agents of change and awareness raising at the community level.

44. Mr. Mohamed Ali Alhakim, Executive Secretary at ESCWA, thanked DESA and Simon Fraser for this partnership. He delivered remarks on the effects of conflict on both water infrastructure and water quality. Because government responses are focused on alleviating the impacts of emerging conflict situations, water infrastructure and quality continue to deteriorate. Furthermore, Mr. Alhakim remarked on women’s low participation in the labour force in the Arab region which necessitates civil society and cultural change. He noted that further attention needs to be paid to translating policy recommendations into real implementation on the ground.

45. Ms. Kenza Kaouakib-Robinson, Senior Sustainable Development Officer at DESA, and Ms. Carol Chouchani Cherfane, Chief of the Water Resources Section at ESCWA, co-chaired the opening session.

### C. PARTICIPANTS

46. The expert group meeting was attended by 40 representatives from eight Arab States as well as thirteen regional and international organizations, in addition to the meeting organizers.

## LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

### NATIONAL PARTICIPANTS

#### EGYPT

**Ms. Soumaya Ibrahim**

Independent Consultant on Gender and  
Development  
Cairo, Egypt  
Tel: +201 006684876  
E-mail: soumayaibrahim1@gmail.com

#### IRAQ

**Ms. Ghada Alamily**

General Director  
Almada Group for Media Culture and Arts  
Baghdad, Iraq  
Tel: +964 7901906978  
E-mail: ghada.a@almada-group.com

#### JORDAN

**Ms. Reem Al Rawashdeh**

Senior Columnist  
Al Rai Newspaper  
Amman, Jordan  
Tel: +962 795139808  
E-mail: reem7373@hotmail.com

**Ms. Mervat Kamal Batarseh**

Head  
Environmental Education Section  
Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature  
(RSCN)  
Amman, Jordan  
Tel: +962 795444031  
E-mail: mervtbat@yahoo.com;  
mervatb2000@gmail.com

**Ms. Nedjma Koval Saifi**

Founding Partner and CEO  
Integrated International  
Amman, Jordan  
Tel: +962 796114000  
E-mail: nkoval@integratedinternational.org

### LEBANON

**Ms. Mey Al Sayegh**

Communication Manager and Journalist  
Communication Department  
Ministry of State for Displaced Affairs  
Beirut, Lebanon  
Tel: +961 1981870, ext. 111  
E-mail: mey.sayegh@gmail.com

**Ms. Mona Fakih**

Director of Water  
General Directorate of Hydraulic and Electric  
Resources  
Ministry of Energy and Water  
Beirut, Lebanon  
Tel: +961 1565097  
E-mail: monafakih@hotmail.com

**Ms. Imam Abd El Al**

Founder and Treasurer  
Abd El Al Foundation  
Beirut, Lebanon  
Tel: +961 1655898; +961 1644800  
E-mail: abdelal@cyberia.net.lb

### SUDAN

**Amb. Shahira Wahbi**

Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
Khartoum, Sudan  
E-mail: shuhryar@yahoo.com

**Mr. Osman Hussein Abubaker**

General Director  
Almassar Organization  
Khartoum, Sudan  
Tel: +249 912313536  
E-mail: hq@almassar.org

### STATE OF PALESTINE

**Ms. Karen Assaf**

Director, Water Research  
Arab Scientific Institute for Research and  
Transfer of Technology (ASIR)  
Ramallah, State of Palestine  
Tel: +970 599 727630

E-mail: dr.karen.assaf@gmail.com

**Ms. Manal Tamimi**

Field Researcher  
Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling  
Ramallah, State of Palestine  
E-mail: manal\_t73@yahoo.com

**SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC**

**Ms. Suheir Raies**

Head  
Syria Coast Society for Environment Protection  
Lattakia, Syrian Arab Republic  
Tel: +963 944476015, +963 944467015  
E-mail: dr.suheirraies@gmail.com

**Ms. Khater Al-Ali**

WASH Volunteer  
Mercy Corps  
Zahlé, Lebanon

**Ms. Fatima Al-Jaffal**

WASH Volunteer  
Mercy Corps  
Zahlé, Lebanon

**YEMEN**

**Ms. Layla Lutf Al-Thour**

President  
SAM Organization for Rights and Development  
Sana'a, Yemen  
Tel: +967 733818066; +967 01471276  
E-mail: lailalutf@gmail.com

**REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL  
ORGANIZATIONS AND UNIVERSITIES**

**American University of Beirut**

**Ms. Yasmina El Amine**

Project Coordinator  
Climate Change and the Environment  
Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and  
International Affairs  
American University of Beirut  
Beirut, Lebanon  
Tel: +961 1374444  
E-mail: ye15@aub.edu.lb

**Ms. Roxanne Corbeil**

Student  
American University of Beirut  
Beirut, Lebanon  
E-mail: rlc1@williams.edu

**American University of Iraq Sulaimani**

**Ms. Maria Saldarriaga**

Assistant Professor and Chair  
Department of Mathematics and Natural Sciences  
American University of Iraq Sulaimani  
Sulaimania, Iraq  
Tel: +964 7701012180  
E-mail: maria.saldarriaga@auis.edu.krd

**Center for Arab Unity Studies**

**Ms. Luna Abu Swaireh**

Director General  
Center for Arab Unity Studies  
Beirut, Lebanon  
Tel: +961 1 750 084  
E-mail: director-general@caus.org.lb

**Geneva Water Hub**

**Mr. François Münger**

Director  
Geneva Water Hub  
Geneva, Switzerland  
Tel: +41 22 730 8643  
Email: fmuenger@genevawaterhub.org

**Ms. Natasha Carmi**

Water Advisor  
Geneva Water Hub  
Geneva, Switzerland  
Tel: +41765290717  
E-mail: carmi.natasha@gmail.com;  
ncarmi@genevawaterhub.org

**Mercy Corps**

**Ms. Fatima Kourdy**

Community Organizer  
MercyCorps - Bekaa Area  
Zahlé, Lebanon  
Tel: +961 81 640777  
E-mail: fkourdy@mercy corps.org

**Ms. Nour Shoker**  
Community Organizer  
Mercy Corps - Bekaa Area  
Zahlé, Lebanon  
Cel: +961 76 777948  
E-mail: nshoker@mercy Corps.org

#### **Simon Fraser University**

**Mr. Zafar Adeel**  
Professor of Professional Practice  
Pacific Water Research Center  
Simon Fraser University  
Vancouver, Canada  
Tel: +1 7786882701  
E-mail: zadeel@sfu.ca

**Ms. Maria Kawahara**  
Research Assistant  
Simon Fraser University  
Vancouver, Canada  
Tel: +1 2508917972  
E-mail: kaw.maria@gmail.com

**Ms. Nina Kfoury Nichols**  
Research Assistant  
Simon Fraser University  
Vancouver, Canada  
E-mail: nina.mk.nichols@gmail.com

#### **Swedish Red Cross**

**Ms. Margareta Wahlström**  
President  
Swedish Red Cross  
International Federation of Red Cross and Red  
Crescent Societies  
Stockholm, Sweden  
Tel: +46 8 452 46 00; +46 8 452 46 01  
Email info@redcross.se

#### **EXPERTS**

**Ms. Farida Al-Jadir**  
Water Expert  
Former ESCWA Water Resources Section Officer  
Sulaimania, Iraq  
E-mail: aljadirfarida@yahoo.com

**Ms. Petra Akoury**  
Consultant and Trainer on Rural Development  
and Women Empowerment

Deir El Ahmar, Bekaa, Lebanon  
Cel: +961 3033209  
E-Mail: petra.akoury@hotmail.com

**Mr. Antoine Katbe**  
Water Expert  
Katbe Properties  
330 East 38<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York, NY 10016  
Cel: +961 03 272972  
Tel: +1 646 3312194  
E-mail: akatbe@rcn.com

**Ms. Chahra Ksia**  
Former Director  
Center of Arab Water Studies and Water Security  
League of Arab States  
Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic  
Tel: +963 944 401 022 (Damascus)  
Tel: +216 28 723 467 (Tunis)  
E-mail: c\_ksia@hotmail.com

#### **UNITED NATIONS ORGANIZATIONS**

##### **FAO**

**Mr. Walid Saleh**  
Chief Technical Advisor  
Food and Agricultural Organization of the United  
Nations  
Sana'a, Yemen  
Tel: +967 1432681/2, ext. 36  
E-mail: walid.saleh@fao.org

##### **UNICEF**

**Mr. Olivier Thonet**  
Chief  
Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Section  
United Nations Children's Fund  
Beirut, Lebanon  
Tel:  
E-mail: othonet@unicef.org

**Ms. Diala Ktaiche**  
WASH Officer  
Public Health Promotion  
Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Section  
United Nations Children's Fund  
Beirut, Lebanon  
Tel: +961 1757411  
E-mail: dktaiche@unicef.org

## **UNRWA**

### **Ms. Nadine El Marouk**

Head of Design and Planning Unit  
Nahr El Bared Reconstruction Project Unit  
United Nations Relief and Works Agency for  
Palestine Refugees (UNRWA)  
Tripoli, Lebanon  
Tel: +961 3690725  
E-mail: n.elmarouk@unrwa.org

## **UN-Water**

### **Ms. Daniella Bostrom Couffe**

Communications Manager  
UN-Water  
Geneva, Switzerland  
Tel: +41 22 730 8561  
E-mail: daniella.bostrom@unwater.org

## **WHO**

### **Ms. Nohal Al Homsin**

Environmental Health Officer  
World Health Organization  
Beirut, Lebanon  
Tel: +961 1612970/1/2, ext. 61826  
E-mail: alhomsin@leb.emro.who.int;  
alhomsin@who.int

## **UNITED NATIONS DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS**

### **Ms. Kenza Kaouakib-Robinson**

Senior Sustainable Development Officer  
Department of Economic and Social Affairs  
United Nations Headquarters  
New York, USA  
Tel: +1 2129638559  
E-mail: robinson1@un.org

## **UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA (ESCWA)**

United Nations Economic and Social Commission  
for Western Asia (ESCWA)  
United Nations House  
Riad El Solh Square  
P.O. Box 11-8575  
Beirut, Lebanon

Tel: + 961 1981301  
Fax: + 961 1981510

### **Mr. Mohamed Ali Alhakim**

Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations  
Executive Secretary of ESCWA  
Tel: +961 1981301

### **Ms. Roula Majdalani**

Director  
Sustainable Development Policies Division  
Tel: +961 1978502  
E-mail: majdalani@un.org

### **Ms. Mehrinaz El Awady**

Director  
Centre for Women  
Tel: +961 1978650  
E-mail: elawady@un.org

### **Ms. Carol Chouchani Cherrane**

Chief  
Water Resources Section  
Sustainable Development Policies Division  
Tel: +961 1978518  
Cel: +961 3368248  
E-mail: chouchanicherfane@un.org

### **Mr. Mohamed Al-Hamdi**

Acting Chief  
Food and Environmental Policies Section  
Sustainable Development Policies Division  
Tel: +961 1978524  
E-mail: al-hamdi@un.org

### **Mr. Ziad Khayat**

First Economic Affairs Officer  
Water Resources Section  
Sustainable Development Policies Division  
Tel: +961 1978517  
E-mail: khayat@un.org

### **Ms. Stephanie Chaban**

Social Affairs Officer  
Center for Women  
Tel: +961 1978657  
Email: stephanie.chaban@un.org

### **Ms. Souraya Zein**

Associate Economic Affairs Officer  
Water Resources Section  
Sustainable Development Policies Division  
Tel: +961 1978441

Email: zein@un.org

**Ms. Dima Kharbotli**

Research Assistant

Water Resources Section

Sustainable Development Policies Division

Tel: +961 1 978575

E-mail: kharbotli@un.org

**Mr. El Hadi Radwan**

Research Assistant

Water Resources Section

Sustainable Development Policies Division

Tel: +961 1978569

Cel: +961 3231217

E-mail: radwan@un.org

**Mr. Adnan Kaddoura**

Staff Assistant

Water Resources Section

Sustainable Development Policies Division

Tel: +961 1978504

Email: kaddouraa@un.org

**Ms. Mary Therese Snyder**

Research Assistant

Water Resources Section

Sustainable Development Policies Division

Tel: +961 1978791

E-mail: marytherese.escwa@gmail.com