

# Drought, Thirst, and Hunger

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*“The human right to water is indispensable for leading a life in human dignity. It is a prerequisite for the realisation of other human rights...Water should be treated as a social and cultural good, and not primarily as an economic good”. - Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. General Comment No. 15 “The Right to Water”, November 2002.*

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Lebanon is a country rich in water resources, uniquely so. For several years, however, there has been talk of this ‘water-rich’ country facing the serious potential of becoming ‘water-stressed’ and ‘water-scarce.’

That time has come, and is projected to worsen.

*Water in Lebanon: Where we are now...*

“Despite relatively amply natural water supplies ... Lebanon may already be in a water deficit situation.”<sup>1</sup> As the water supply is expected to decline, the demand for water in Lebanon is expected to increase. Specifically, the daily water consumption in Lebanon is expected to increase approximately fifty percent.<sup>2</sup> (Approximately 58% of Lebanon’s total water demand is for irrigation (rising to 69% during the dry season), and the industrial and domestic demand account for approximately 10% and 32%, respectively.)<sup>3</sup>

Not only is there greater demand than supply, but much of the water that is available, through public networks, is polluted. Eighty percent of public water supplies are polluted at source or during distribution through contaminated pipes despite chlorination and water treatment.<sup>4</sup>

Why has the government failed to remedy this problem and recognize water as a human right? Four reasons, according to researcher Karim Makdissi: “a lack of capacity, lack of political will, neo-liberal development policies, and tension with regard to transboundary water resources.”<sup>5</sup>

Looked at it from a different angle, the political decisions to *allow* a lack of capacity and to *maintain* an absence of will significantly contributed – and continue to contribute - to intensify (further) neo-liberal economic policies.

Lebanon recently initiated a reform process for water management that relies on private sector participation, while making “no mention of plans to secure legal rights for all Lebanese to access sufficient and clean water.”<sup>6</sup> Rather, it places its emphasis on privatization.

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<sup>1</sup> K. Makdissi. (2007) ‘Towards a Human Rights Approach to Water in Lebanon: Implementation Beyond ‘Reform.’ **International Journal of Water Resource Development**. 23:2, 369-390. Online Publication Date: 1 June 2007.

<sup>2</sup> M. El Fadel, M. Zeinati, and D. Jamali. (2000) ‘Water Resources in Lebanon: Characterization, Water Balance, and Constraints.’ **Water Resources Development**. 16(4). Pp. 615-638.

<sup>3</sup> F. Comair. (2005) **Miyah lubnan bayn al-diya’a wa al-isthmar** (Beirut: Dakkash Publishers). – Quoted from K. Makdissi. [Samah: Whom do you reference? Makdissi or Comair?]

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Environment (Lebanon). (2005). **Draft National Environmental Action Plan**. Beirut: MoE-MS-Environment.

<sup>5</sup> Makdissi. 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Makdissi. 2007.

Through several laws, water privatization has been pushed – both directly, through the established in 2000 of the Higher Council for Privatization (HCP), and indirectly, through the establishment of four regional Water Establishments, “now responsible for all water and sanitation projects within their jurisdiction [thus paving] the way for privatization by transforming the [Water Establishments] into viable commercial institutions (under the supervision of the Ministry of Finance). Since then, the HCP has worked with international expert institutions to prepare a master privatization plan, while severely limiting public participation and debate, and stifling the dissemination of information.<sup>7</sup> Since then, management contracts of several water authorities in Lebanon have been given to the private sector. ONDEO, a branch of the French Suez Environment Group, has been awarded a \$21 million contract,<sup>8</sup> to pipe water from intake points to storage reservoirs and then on to households via their water gauges, while having the authority to suspend the service to consumers refusing to subscribe or who take water illicitly.<sup>9</sup> The Beqa’a and South Lebanon Water Establishment Regions have also awarded similar management contracts.<sup>10</sup>

*Water in Lebanon: Where are we going?*

As with agriculture, fewer companies are controlling more of this ‘resource’ essential to human survival. “There are 10 major corporate players now delivering freshwater services for profit. Between them, the three biggest – Suez and Vivendi Environment of France and RWE-AG of Germany – deliver water and wastewater services to almost 300 million customers in more than 100 countries.”<sup>11</sup>

These powerful corporations encourage the privatization of water services, illegally through bribery<sup>12</sup> and more powerfully through lobbying for (further) liberalization of trade agreements<sup>13</sup> by including water as a ‘good’ and an ‘investment.’<sup>14</sup>

The privatization of water services is also strongly encouraged by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – with the emphasis on profit margins and not on environmental sustainability, even encouraging water leakage so that water can be sold at a larger profit.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the World Bank promotes the French system of water privatisation through concessions, a system discredited by an official French audit report in 1997 due to corruption, lack of transparency and lack of competitiveness. Furthermore, the system leaves elected councillors on their own, without support, to deal with conglomerates wielding immense political, economic and financial power.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps that is the objective.

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<sup>7</sup> Makdissi 2007

<sup>8</sup> Daily Star. December 13, 2002. As quoted by the Programme on Private Participation in Mediterranean Infrastructure. World Bank/European Commission. Issue no. 11. December 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Makdissi. 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Makdissi. 2007.

<sup>11</sup> M. Barlow and T. Clarke. 2002. **Blue Gold: The fight to stop the corporate theft of the world’s water**. New Press.

<sup>12</sup> Friends of the Earth. Vivendi. Corporate Accountability and the Johannesburg Earth Summit.

<http://www.foe.org/WSSD/vivendi.html>

<sup>13</sup> Friends of the Earth. Stealing our Water. Implications of GATS on global water resources. November 2001.

[http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/gats\\_stealing\\_water.pdf](http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/gats_stealing_water.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Jeff Fleisher. 2005. ‘Blue Gold: An Interview with Maude Barlow.’ **Mother Jones**. January 14, 2005.

[http://www.motherjones.com/news/qa/2005/01/maude\\_barlow.html](http://www.motherjones.com/news/qa/2005/01/maude_barlow.html)

<sup>15</sup> David Hall. ‘World Bank-Politburo of Water Privatization.’ Quoted from: Miloon Kothari. 2003. ‘Privatizing Human Rights: the impact of globalization on access to adequate housing, water and sanitation.’ Habitat International Coalition.

<http://www.hic-net.org/articles.asp?PID=194>

<sup>16</sup> Hall. 2003.

Regionally, Lebanon is not alone in opening its ‘market’ to the privatization of this essential human right. Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, Algeria, and Egypt – to varying degrees – have also awarded contracts in water services.<sup>17</sup>

Water privatization is achieved not only through the awarding of contracts to corporations, but also through the acceptance of another alternative by the purchasing of bottled water. Of the top 15 per capita consumers of bottled water in the world, Lebanon<sup>18</sup> has one of the fastest growth rates,<sup>19</sup> at a cost of \$85 million per year.<sup>20</sup> The purchasing of bottled water becomes a vicious feedback loop: by buying water, we don’t pressure the state to provide clean drinking water; the state maintains its policy of failing to provide necessities, thus pushing more people to purchase bottled water. Those who get caught outside this loop are the very communities most in need of assistance: those too poor to purchase their water.

Privatization could also come about under the guise of “cooperative research,” as is currently promoted by a two-year academic fellowship by the Brookings Institute to study “water management in Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria” to “foster cooperative research between academics from Israel and neighbouring States.”<sup>21</sup>

Much has been written about the impacts of water privatization on communities, particularly on the communities most economically vulnerable. The bottom line remains: if water distribution is left to the market economy, then it will be distributed in the manner that creates the highest profit. “In a world with grossly unequal income distribution and a growing relative scarcity of water, many people have very limited means to pay. ... Only extensive regulation will deter the private supplier from increasing prices and decreasing quality. With no competition to drive down prices nor regulation to control costs, private sector provision of water is likely to be less efficient than public sector provision – as well as less just.”<sup>22</sup>

### *And Beyond*

The world is incurring a vast water deficit. This global water shortage will likely translate into hunger before thirst.<sup>23</sup> Already, due to a multitude of reasons, prices for wheat, corn and milk have significantly increased.

Throughout this quagmire, it is critical to recognize that the environment itself is a legitimate user of water: water for people, food, **and** nature.

Where will be tomorrow if we continue down this path of gross mismanagement?

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<sup>17</sup> Edouard Pérard. 2007. Private Sector Participation and Regulatory Reform in Water Supply: The Middle East and North African (MEDA) Experience. [http://www.privatizationbarometer.net/upp/UPP\\_D.3.1\\_FEEM\\_Perard.pdf](http://www.privatizationbarometer.net/upp/UPP_D.3.1_FEEM_Perard.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> And the United Arab Emirates and Mexico

<sup>19</sup> E. Arnold and J. Larsen. 2006. Bottled Water: Pouring Resources Down the Drain. Earth Policy Institute. February 2, 2006. <http://www.earth-policy.org/Updates/2006/Update51.htm>

<sup>20</sup> World Bank. 2005. ‘Avertive Expenditures: Bottled Water Consumption in Lebanon.’

<sup>21</sup> [www.brookings.edu/admin/wolfensohn\\_fellowship\\_WM.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/admin/wolfensohn_fellowship_WM.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> H. Daly and J. Farley. **Ecological Economics: Principles and Applications**. Island Press. 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Barry James. ‘Overuse leading to food shortages, study warns: Less water – and less to eat.’ **International Herald Tribune**. October 18, 2002.