

Rethinking the EU-MENA Climate Cooperation

Discussion paper following the 13 July 2022 webinar event, “The Water-Climate Nexus: Avenues for EU-MENA Cooperation”.

REVITALISING **MULTILATERAL** PERSPECTIVE AND POLICY SERIES

DISCUSSION PAPER

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INTRODUCTION

On 13 July 2022, the Brussels International Center organized a webinar event “The Water-Climate Nexus: Avenues for EU-MENA Cooperation” and welcomed a diverse panel of experts from the European Institutions, academia, and NGOs to discuss climate and water issues in the Middle East and North Africa region. The event also explored prospects of stronger trans-continental green cooperation between the European Union and Middle East and North Africa countries. Joint climate action in achieving resilience and a green, sustainable, and inclusive transition is a core pillar of the renewed agenda for the Mediterranean adopted by the European Union in 2021. Acting on the water crisis is a concern of top priority for all MENA countries, and it will therefore be raised as a special topic on the agenda of the COP27 next November in Sharm-El-Sheik by the Egyptian authorities.

Given the increasingly harsher climate conditions on every shore of the Mediterranean Sea and the recent growing political awareness and efforts towards

climate action, there is a necessity to enhance stronger inter-regional partnerships, especially with regard to the pressing issue of water scarcity in the MENA region. Due to its geographic, cultural, political, and economic ties with its neighbours, the EU has interests in developing adaptive climate strategies and mitigating climate spill over effects. The EU is in this respect already involved in several technical projects in the MENA region regarding climate change and water issues. There is however a need to go further in the realization of such a partnership, and as reflected during the panel discussion, a necessity to rethink more generally the EU's external and climate engagement in MENA countries.

The key question of the discussion was to assess to what extent the EU can engage more effectively on climate and water actions in the MENA region.

1. ASSESSING CLIMATE AND WATER TRENDS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

According to the IPCC, the Mediterranean is warming 20% faster than the global average and without mitigation measures, the temperatures are projected to increase by 2.2°C by 2040 – meaning that the increase of temperatures in the region will be higher than the limit of 2°C set by the Paris Agreements. Climate change is affecting the region in dire and multiple ways, amplifying problems of governance, and aggravating socioeconomic inequalities; themselves exacerbated by other social trends such as the pressures added by demographic changes and poor economic growth.

“ Approximately 60 % of the population in the region already live in areas under severe water stress - this means that they have little or no access to drinkable water.”

Malte Gallee, Member of the European Parliament

Water is already a scarce resource in the MENA region and is additionally the first casualty of climate change effects. Freshwater availability and quality are projected to decrease in the future, while water demand from irrigation, tourism, and urbanization is on the contrary expected to grow. Shortage of water will therefore create conflicts between water users and will also add additional pressure to the domestic food production system, while the region is already dependent on food imports by 50%. That is why the problem of water scarcity in the region, and the

supplementary challenges climate change poses, cannot be analysed without considering the issue of food security.

“The region is projected to be the first of the world to effectively run out of water. [...] It is estimated that 200 million people approximately in the region will experience water poverty, in particular water stress, which leads to crop failures and large-scale disruptions in food systems.”

Silvia Crescimbeni, Policy Officer at DG CLIMA, EU Commission

In addition, the region is increasingly facing pressures from natural disasters, notably from desertification and the rising frequency of sand and dust storms. The coastal population of the region, particularly in North Africa, is also extremely vulnerable to the elevation of sea waters. Responding to such extreme climate events costs approximately 2.5% of the countries' GDP each year.

2. ENGAGING WATER AND CLIMATE GOVERNANCE FOR A MORE RESILIENT, FAIRER, AND MORE INCLUSIVE GREEN TRANSITION

The panel of experts agreed that the key angle to tackle climate change, and deal with water scarcity in the MENA region, should not be taken from a technical perspective only, because it is essentially a question of governance and management.

“Climate is a question of governance; it is not just about technical points or financing major projects. [...] The more we empower the meso-level, it might then create new forms of governance.”

Nadim Houry, Executive Director of Arab Reform Initiatives

There are risks and threats that have lingered for decades in the region that climate change is multiplying, which are mainly due to a lack of collective capacities from the countries of the region and other external actors. In the MENA region, water stress is not determined only by the available level of freshwater, but moreover by the countries' capacity to mitigate their water poverty. Conflicts have also largely contributed to increasing water stress, notably in Syria, or in Iraq with the destruction of large water infrastructures during the US invasion. This is why the Gulf States are managing more effectively their water stress than other countries such

as Lebanon, Iraq or Syria that have greater amount of freshwater but deeply rooted problems of governance.

The situation of water scarcity in the Nile, Jordan, Euphrates, and Tigris basins make no exception, and climate change is now adding other critical problems, droughts, and floods. Technical investments such as building dams and storage technologies are parts of the answer, but the solution is mainly about improving management.

“In the MENA region, we have The Nile basin, the Jordan river, the Euphrate and Tigris and the situation there is critical because the baseline of water supply, the existence of water resource is scarce. But climate is just adding problems to things that have been going wrong for decades. ”

Ana Cascao, Independent Researcher

Three main issues that are impeding climate actions have been identified by the panel of experts:

- The lack of governance and accountability from the countries of the region must urgently be addressed and should remain the first priority. This gap of governance is also negatively impacting works on climate change, especially when we look at the absence of updated data. False assumptions because of a lack or outdated data can negatively impact policy planning.
- Climate change must be tackled from an intersectional approach which includes the water, food, and security nexus. Indeed, acting on one issue can impact another one. Countries of the region have implemented innovative approach towards climate action, moving away from sectoral approaches by incorporating the climate dimension into a holistic perspective and the whole economy.
- Civic awareness and engagement are also key in addressing climate change. However, in the MENA region the space for mobilization is narrowing for environmental journalists or activists, which makes the situation of civic participation at COP27 in Egypt quite alarming. In the region, people are aware and worried about issues concerning water and air pollution or food insecurity, but do not make the connexions with climate change. It is

however necessary to boost the demand-side from the people to trigger climate actions.

3. IDENTIFYING THE GAPS IN THE EU-MENA CLIMATE PARTNERSHIP

“In order to support the MENA countries with useful policies the EU has to take into account the special circumstances of every country and the current governance situation.”

Malte Gallee, Member of the European Parliament

3.1. What the EU is already doing:

The EU as an institution and its Member States have for decades been engaged in supporting the MENA countries through mainly diplomatic outreach, financing, and technical assistance. For the next seven years, as part of the renewed agenda for the Mediterranean, the EU will allocate €7 billion in aid to the MENA region and 42% is dedicated to the mitigation of climate change. This aid alone will not be sufficient to support the countries in achieving their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) targets. Most of their targets are also conditional to international finance, and the EU alone cannot bear the burden of financial assistance.

The EU has been supporting the region mainly with financing aids, supporting climate plans and technical projects. The EU has also been working on finding tools to provide direct fundings to municipalities and local authorities.

“ The EU has conducted and financed a lot of major studies under the Cascade Program on the future-forward looking scenarios, and which provided direct recommendations to the European Union. [...] The question is, instead of the replication of studies and scenarios, how do we use these recommendations? ”

Ana Cascao, Independent Researcher

On the technical aspect, regarding water management, the EU has for decades provided several types of assistance. It has supported other regional organizations such as the African Union and initiatives such as the Nile Basin Initiative. When it comes to the negotiations around the Ethiopian Grand Renaissance Dam, the EU has offered good office for the negotiations.

3.2. How the partnership can change:

The experts have all identified a strong need to rethink climate finance. The EU should implement and finance more locally based projects. Most of the external aid funded by the EU are only mega-projects that benefit mostly political elites, not the local population. In some countries, local actions have far more potential to deliver efficient and impactful climate action than central projects. The EU could also play a central role in promoting some regional initiatives that the region is desperately lacking.

“When we look at the national level, we also need to look at who is being affected internally. Is everyone not having access to water the same way? Of course not. The region is also one of the most unequal”.

Nadim Houry, Executive Director of Arab Reform Initiatives

The key for a successful EU-MENA partnership is the achievement of an equitable climate-proof transition. EU projects should be at the core of the just and fair green transition and ensure that new projects do not deepen social inequalities, be it with regards to gender inequalities, minorities, marginalized populations, or inhabitants of informal housings. There is a real intersection between gender-based discrimination and water scarcity. In many regions, women bear a disproportionate responsibility for securing food, water, and fuel. In addition, women and girls experience greater impacts of climate change, since it amplifies existing gender inequalities and systemic discrimination, posing unique threats to their livelihoods, health, and safety.

Therefore, the EU should incorporate a gender-responsive climate-action at the core of any climate-related initiatives, responding to the specific needs of women, girls, boys and men.

When it comes to energy, the panel of speakers have also raised concerns about the extractivist approach the EU has developed towards the region, and the need to shift away from this model. The EU is financing many projects for the green transition in the region, notably to buy Green Hydrogen in North Africa, but it is essential that those projects benefit the whole population. Concerns over the spill over effects of climate change from MENA to the EU should also not be reduced to migration issues only.

“Transitions should be just and inclusive, and it is one of the core elements of the engagement the EU will pursue, otherwise, it will not be successful.”

Silvia Crescimbeni, Policy Officer at DG Clima, EU Commission

As raised by the panel of experts, the two regions are still largely relying on each other for trade. The external role of the Green Deal should therefore be an opportunity for the MENA countries to fast-forward their economic and energy transition as a big catalyst for trade, markets, economies, and transactions.

The panel's conversation has dealt with how the EU could support the region in mitigating climate change but it has also been noticed that the EU should not forget about financing climate adaptation as well, not only focusing on the reduction of greenhouse gases emissions but also on permaculture and circular economy projects. In this regard, the whole issue of waste generation – and wastewater – should also be urgently addressed.

The panel of experts have concluded that the financing support the EU brings to the region to fight climate change effects is essential but should be restructured to ensure that EU projects are mutually benefiting the partners, promote stronger climate ambitions and governance, with greater local penetration.

| POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To the European Union:

- Engage further with MENA partners to foster political changes and increase climate readiness from the inside, by raising ambitions, capacity-building, dialogues, and assistance.
- Combine the financing of centralized and decentralized projects on green, water, food, and energy solutions in the MENA region. Municipalities and local authorities know better about local negative externalities of centralized programs and are actors the EU could also engage with and in turn, promote local networks.
- Ensure more flexibility with green finance and the development of decentralized and localized projects, for which the approval of the latter shall not always be up to the approval of the national level, but should be left to the authorization of local authorities.
- Incorporate a gender-responsive approach at the core of any climate-related initiatives, corresponding to the specific needs of women, girls, boys and men in the affected population. Develop community focus groups, equality represented by women and men, to discuss their different needs.
- Incorporate climate change and its broad impacts into the EU-MENA trade and economic partnership. The two regions are still mutually dependent on each other and could benefit jointly from transcontinental climate actions.
- Implement a bi-directional conversation on the common climate impacts the European continent is facing with the MENA region and start implementing joint climate actions.

- Incorporate the principles of fairness, justice, and inclusivity at the core of the EU-MENA renewed agenda for a successful partnership towards the green transition and ensure that marginalized groups benefit as well from climate-related projects.
- Engage more on the front of human rights to protect the civic space and environmental activism in the region and facilitate networking between civil society and stakeholders by providing forums of discussion.

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

Revitalising Multilateral Perspective and Policy Series

This project assesses multilateral measures being implemented by institutions such as the United Nations and the European Union and aims to find more effective policy to end conflict and foster sustainable political solutions.



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