

CHALLENGE A

Lack of democratic decision-making processes and water-sharing management at local and regional levels and the privatization of water resources and water infrastructure, which hinder access to water.

The United Nations General Assembly recognized access to water as a human right in 2010. However, this human right is under threat in many places around the world. The Mesopotamian region, traversed by the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, is one example of an area where people face problems accessing clean and sufficient water. One of its main causes is the lack of transparency and the exclusion of key stakeholders from decision-making processes. Often communities are not taken into account by policy-makers. All relevant actors, which include activists, civil society organizations, social movements, local communities, academics/researchers, municipalities and regional administrations should come together to decide on a better sustainable approach to water sharing.

In addition, water resources and water infrastructure such as dams and irrigation schemes have been privatized, resulting in practices that entrench social injustices and breed resentment among water users. We believe sustainable and equitable use of water should be possible for all people living in the Tigris-Euphrates basin.

Water and democracy: Can local communities influence water management in the Tigris-Euphrates River Basins?

Abstract

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International legal and ethical standards emphasize that the design, planning and implementation of projects that have potential impact on human rights – including health and well-being – should include in a material and substantive way broad stakeholder consultation.

This paper will outline some of the mechanisms by which relevant actors (including activists, civil society organizations, social movements, local communities, academics/researchers, municipalities, and regional administrations) can cooperate with and apply pressure on governments, large corporations and small/medium-size enterprises (SMEs) to achieve sustainable approaches to water sharing. Some of these methods are cooperative, others oppositional.

Part I: Exploring ways to democratize water management in Mesopotamia

We invite activists, scholars, journalists and others with an interest in public participation and water rights in the Tigris-Euphrates basin to join us in exploring various opportunities for broadening stakeholder participation in water resource management.

Poor management of the Tigris-Euphrates basin has greatly diminished the quantity and quality of water available to diverse communities across the region, depriving many households of access to adequate supplies of clean water. Many argue that mismanagement is due at least in part to the general lack of transparency, weak accountability, and the exclusion of key stakeholders.

Questions to be addressed in part I include:

- What tools and methods can water rights activists use to hold decision-makers to account for projects that have negative impacts on human rights?
- How have local communities adapted traditional practices to manage shared resources today? Can these practices be adapted to broaden and strengthen stakeholder participation in the design, development, and implementation of water management projects?
- How can stakeholders from different locales across the Tigris-Euphrates basin work together to increase their impact on water management policies? (For example, how can water rights activists develop new fora – such as Ecopeace in the Jordan river basin – as a way of addressing imbalances in decision-making processes?)

Part II: Identifying and transcending barriers to participation

We also invite stories and reflections on the struggle to democratize water resource management.

Diverse obstacles make it expensive, time-consuming, and even dangerous for citizens – individually and collectively – to exercise their right to participate in and influence the planning, design, and implementation of resource management projects.

Questions to be addressed in Part II include:

- In what ways is "participation" used by project promoters to "engineer" consent for dams and other mega water projects? What traps does "participation" pose for water rights activists?
- What steps do authorities typically follow to criminalize both criticism of as well as opposition to state-sponsored projects?
- How can water rights activists resist attempts to limit stakeholder discussions to technical aspects of individual projects rather than to debates over broader implications for social and economic well-being?

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<http://www.savethetigris.org/international-mesopotamian-water-forum>