



Mesopotamian Water Forum - Sulaymaniyah, 6-8 April 2019

A civil society space for open dialogue about the status and access of bodies of water in Mesopotamia

Final Report

Forum identity

The Mesopotamian Forum is an alternative *civil society* forum for water, an open space to give voice to those who are marginalized and excluded from the discussion about water management in the Mesopotamian region. It was held from 6-8 April 2019 in Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and involved civil society actors from the entire region of Mesopotamia within the states of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria. The Mesopotamian Water Forum is based on the social forum model, and is part of the global world social forum process. The idea of the forum was launched during a joint meeting of Save the Tigris Campaign in the city of Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, in April 2017.

The Forum will provide a space for open and public dialogue about the status and access of bodies of water in the Mesopotamian region, with particular emphasis on the issue of water rights in the Mesopotamian context. The Forum proposes a framework for a water policy which is based on participation, sustainability and other social and ecological principles. We want to foster public debate and encourage broad involvement in initiatives that might be implemented to transform water into an instrument for solidarity and peace, making it a model for the just and fair sharing of resources. We reject the use of water as a tool for oppression, used to entrench inequitable power dynamics that perpetuate ongoing conflicts.

The first Mesopotamian Water Forum was an important opportunity to promote a society-wide coalition for transboundary water cooperation that includes all relevant actors in the region. Civil society organizations, activists, researchers, academics, journalists, local community representatives and local authorities who share each other's values and are involved in the struggle for sustainable and participatory water management methods, who support the conviction that water is a tool for solidarity and sustainable peace, were invited to take part in the discussions and actions of this Forum. Around 180 participants from the region and beyond took part in 3 days of activities.

Mesopotamia faces the following challenges:

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.

B. Construction of large dams and other water infrastructure on the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and their tributaries which respect neither the rights of people, nor international standards, hereby threatening the cultural and natural heritage of the Tigris-Euphrates Basin. This is exacerbated by the use of water infrastructure as weapon and a tool for achieving political hegemony in regional conflicts.

Construction of large dams on the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers causes permanent damage to the cultural and natural heritage of local communities. While the lifetime of dams can be less than 50 years, the region's heritage dates back more than 12,000 years! Indigenous communities are severely impacted; some are forced to leave their homelands. The process of constructing dams is often in direct contradiction to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), as well as to environmental conventions such as the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). In recent years, dams and water infrastructures have been used as weapons in regional conflicts and wars. We believe in the alternative: water should be a force for peace and catalyst for cooperation among all the countries and peoples of Tigris-Euphrates Basin.

C. Destruction of the rivers' ecosystem, including water pollution, unsustainable management of water resources and impact of global climate change.

Unsustainable management of transboundary water resources influences the hydrology system of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, and causes harm to the marine ecosystem of their tributaries. Agriculture productivity in the Mesopotamian region has decreased as a result of water pollution, and the negative effects of climate change on the water resources of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers are becoming more apparent. Reduced precipitation and the increased demand for water is an urgent concern for this semi-arid region. The water ecosystem in the Tigris and Euphrates basin should be protected from all types of pollution with support from local communities.

To kickstart the discussions during the plenary sessions of the Forum, we published [3 papers](#) on these topics in advance of the event. They include views from different geographical locations and expertise.

Goals of the Mesopotamian Water Forum

Our goal is to promote cooperation between people in the Mesopotamian region based on these principles:

1. Share and use water resources respecting the principles of equity, effectiveness, participative decision-making, sustainability and accountability.
2. Ensure that watercourses are tools for sustainable peace among all communities in Mesopotamia.
3. Promote sustainable management of our rivers, their ecosystems, biodiversity and our cultural and natural heritage.



Day 1

Opening, welcoming and overview of the program

Session 1

Forum objectives, background and perspectives per country

Dams, bring about destruction in Mesopotamia. The Mesopotamian Water Forum aims to denounce the destructive policies of the states; against the use of water as a weapon. Water instead could be an instrument for peace. This Forum would like to suggest democratic and ecological alternatives for Mesopotamia as a whole.

Kurdistan Region of Iraq

50% of water resources in the Kurdistan Region come from Iran and Turkey. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers itself have never been an obstacle for collaboration. However, planned dams will not bear any fruit; they would harm the environment. We need to have a new generation that is conscious of these issues. We are aware that Iran and Turkey, during the hot seasons, don't respect our water needs and this is why we would like to have a dialogue with them.

Iraq

Water demand in Iraq differs per region. We have the right to participate in the decision-making process of water management. We defeated terrorism, but we still have to deal with conflicts deriving from water issues. People in a city like Basra are dying because of lack of water and because of the poor quality of the water that is present. Water is being used as a political weapon by the Iraqi government and heritage is at risk. We are here because we believe that the dialogue on water should be a regional dialogue and not only an Iraqi one. There needs to be a decision-making mechanism by the entire region, and the people in government have to listen to our voices.

Iran

Civilians are constantly involved and affected by natural disasters, and dams have negatively impacted natural habitats as well as human populations. The role of women in water management should be enhanced in order to have a water resources management that is more inclusive.

Syria

Anton Tome

We are working to develop ecological projects in Rojava. The social revolution happening in Rojava is strictly connected to the ecological revolution. Turkey is controlling most of water resources. Water management in Rojava should be democratic and people should be able to decide on the issues that affect their lands. We are trying to identify a solution that would prevent the desertification of the land.



Turkey

Ercan Ayboga

Commodification of water is a big issue. Access to water should be considered a right and every human being should be given access to this resource. We are against the politicisation of environmental and hydrological issues. In 1987, Turkey and Syria signed a protocol on the use of the Euphrates' waters, but Turkey continued to reduce the river's waterflows at the expense of the downstream countries, arguing that the Euphrates is solely a Turkish river.

Session 2

Our Challenges

Challenge C:

ECOSYSTEM: The Tigris-Euphrates River System: A Status Report

Riparian states of the Tigris and Euphrates use most water of the water in the agricultural sector, and agriculture is the sector that employs the largest number of people in these states. If a number of important agricultural measures are not implemented, drinkable water availability in Mesopotamia will decrease and it will not be enough to satisfy water demands, and hence, the gap between water demand and offer will widen. Underground water should be considered part of the basin as well.

Mismanagement of water is affecting water quality and the biodiversity of Mesopotamian rivers. If completed, the GAP Project in Turkey will cause a tenfold increase in water use. As for climate change, the UN identified 2 possible scenarios: the best-case scenario would allow a decrease of 2 degrees in global temperatures. Unfortunately for the Middle-East, even if this scenario occurred, temperatures in the region are destined to increase anyway. The other scenario, on the other hand, envisions an increase in world temperatures, which would lead to desertification and a decrease in rainfall.

The cause of the low quality of waters in Iraq and the increased salinization of rivers are related to poor water management by the riparian states, particularly Turkey. Governments have not published studies on the environmental impact of big water infrastructure projects and the environmental policies which affect populations. Turkey has a plan to combat climate change while Iran, Iraq and Syria do not. In Rojava there is an issue of polluted water from Turkey. There are currently no laws that regulate the access to river waters. The recent protests in Iran and Iraq were caused by water-related issues.

Challenge B:

DAMS: Policy and Impacts of Dams in the Tigris and Euphrates Basin

Syria and Iraq were the first countries in the basin to build dams on the Tigris and Euphrates (Tabqa and Kaban dams). Then Turkey and Iran followed. The main objective of dam construction, at least according to the governments, is the use of water for irrigational and hydroelectrical purposes. However, dams affect people. The Ataturk dam in Turkey contributed to the displacement of 60 thousand people and the flooding of entire cities. In Turkey, the number of people displaced due to dam construction is about half a million. The Ilisu Dam, currently under construction in Turkey, is set to destroy the heritage of the ancient city of



Hasankeyf, as well as 300 additional archeologic sites. Only central governments, corporations and big landowners benefit from dam construction. Dams allow governments to control water in order to use it as a political and strategic tool against state and non-state actors. For example, Turkey is using dams against the Kurdish population living within its territory. Even non-state actors such as Daesh have used dams as weapons of war.

There is no treaty on water-sharing for all riparian states of the Tigris-Euphrates basin. Currently the Turkish parliament is discussing a memorandum on water between Iraq and Turkey. The construction of dams can have positive effects in the short term, but in the long term, dams tend to have a destructive impact. It is paramount that in case dam construction is started, civil society and local populations are consulted and involved in the decision-making process.

Challenge A:

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN WATER MANAGEMENT: Water and democracy, can local communities influence water management in the Tigris-Euphrates River Basins?

Everyone has their own definition of water management. Some may want to advocate for a water parliament, which would be made up of citizens, civil society and central governments. Representatives would be elected democratically and would represent the people. The concept of democracy should be at the basis of a water parliament, not only as far as democratic election of representatives is concerned, but also when it comes to respect of international law on water. The concept of the water parliament is based on the idea of 'bottom up' government. It is not a traditional parliament as we know it. Representatives would have to remain close to civil society.

Turkey considers itself a democratic country, but there is no genuine participation by civil society in the decision-making process. In many other countries as well, civil society is not involved in decisions taken by authorities. The water forum could be an important example of a democratic space. Civil society is fragmented in the region today, instead it should be unified. The role of international neo-liberal institutions such as the World Bank are dangerous, since they promote policies that are harmful for the environment.

Session 3

Global Perspectives

Fishbowl discussion on perspectives from the global water movement on the Mesopotamian region

The objective of this session is to share the experience of activists from across the world working on water justice. The international dimension of water struggles is important as we can learn from each other.

Speaker 1: Everyone has different understanding of what participation and consent means. Governments usually frame what type of participation is in place.

Speaker 2: Civil society is a state of mind. It is often locally fragmented. We must invite "dam builders" to speak to us. The aim of civil society is to anticipate the moves of



governments/international organisations/banks so that it is not necessary to work with “affected” communities, but with local communities that are not already affected by the construction of dams. Civil society is usually reactive, rather than proactive.

Speaker 3: South America is among the countries that criminalize environmentalists. In Chile, water has been entirely privatised. Latin America is one of the most dangerous regions for environmental activists and environment defenders. Water-related “conflicts” in Latin America are usually intra-state, rather than inter-state conflicts (i.e. faceoffs between government, state-sponsored corporations and local communities that risk being affected by mega projects). In Latin America, there is an attempt to oppose privatization of water with a community/public partnership in the management of water. MAR project in Brazil is an example. While the Bolivian and Ecuadorian constitutions contain the concept of a “right of nature”.

Speaker 4: Heads an umbrella organisation for a global civil society movement against dams. They aim to pressure companies in charge of implementing megaprojects and lobby for the protection of the environment.

Day 2

Participants-organized workshops

Day 3

Session 4

Panel Discussion with representatives and local authorities from the Mesopotamian Region

Session with local authorities:

Rojava Administration, HDP representative and Sulaymaniyah Directorate of Water Supply

Transparency of local authorities is a global issue. “In north-eastern Syria, transparency is crucial, because we, as authorities, are there to provide services to the people. Transparency should be part and parcel of our actions. We need close collaboration between administrations and civil society, promoting participation of the people”.

Session 5

Report-back of workshops action points

Challenge B: DAMS

Recommendations for local governments

- Need for maintenance and reconstruction of existing water infrastructure and dams as and alternative/prerequisite to any further dam construction
- Adopt sustainable and renewable engineering and energy solutions that meet the needs of the people. I.e. education and technology transfers on alternative eco-friendly agriculture to local farmers.



- The role of local governments is crucial as they should be closer to populations. Environmental activists should aspire to be part of local government councils and parliaments.

Recommendations for international organisations

- Increased accountability for international organisations that support development of water infrastructure
- Further research needed on risk management of dams and reservoirs, especially in anticipation of possible future conflicts
- Increased collaboration between local governments and civil society, towards a dynamic relationship, not a top-down relationship.

Recommendations for central governments

- Any large hydropower project construction should be preceded by a public discussion on its justification and possible alternatives.
- The public should be consulted on large infrastructure schemes.
- Transparency is key when it comes to dams, access to reliable information regarding the impacts and real objectives of such large projects.
- Media can play an important role. They can conduct fact-finding missions in regions affected by dam construction. When international media cover certain issues pertaining to the region, they acquire more relevance even on a national and level.

Recommendations for civil society

- Collaboration between CSOs and academics, scientists and experts for educational purposes
- Educate local authorities on the impacts of dams and the available alternatives in energy and water management
- Opposition to lack of consultation and lack of Environmental Impact Assessments
- Need to share south-to-south experiences by countries with similar issues.
- Establish a network of CSOs with a strong social media presence

Challenge C: ECOSYSTEM

Recommendations

- Central governments must guarantee implementation of the laws
- Ministries of Development must be dedicated to environmental protection
- Increase funding for local governments in order to implement local development plans
- Plastic use should be limited (taxing of plastic goods)
- Media should focus on mismanagement of resources
- Youth should be engaged on environmental protection
- Post-Deash new investments for sustainable development

Challenge A: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN WATER MANAGEMENT

Recommendations

What does participation mean? Involving beneficiaries and local communities directly in issues that touch them with broad participation from different social groups. There are different kinds of participation: watching, reading, talking, listening, organising, advocating. It is meaningful if it has an impact.



Local communities are usually those most affected by water issues. Civil society needs to support local communities in order for their voices to be heard. Examples already exist, such as certain water management initiatives in Anbar in collaboration with local authorities. CSOs should raise awareness on citizenship, including environmental awareness, and develop constructive relationships with local and national authorities.

An international democratically-elected water parliament where people defend transboundary watercourses could be an aspiration. This network would discuss water management with local and national governments. Such a parliament would represent different nations and representatives of local communities, civil society and central governments. In other parts of the world, examples of water parliaments exist, i.e. India. Such initiatives can be replicated. Water parliaments work very well on a regional level. On an international level the best option can be an International Court which can be responsible for violations against water rights.

“Water is Under Assault in Mesopotamia” – Final Declaration 1st Mesopotamia Water Forum

Declaration 1st Mesopotamian Water Forum (MWF)

University of Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan Region of Iraq 6-8 April 2019

Sulaimani,

Over-extraction; the draining of marshes and wetlands; deforestation; too many irrigation projects, poorly-drained land; pesticides and fertiliser run-off; contamination by poorly or often un-treated discharges from industry as well as households; the widespread building of large and cascade small dams; the increasing exploitation of groundwater aquifers; stream channelization; inter catchment water transfer schemes; and the ravages of fossil-fuel-induced climatic change have variously disrupted hydrological cycles and created conditions of severe local and regional scarcity. For human and non-human beings, such physical scarcities have been exacerbated by policies aimed at commodifying and/or politicising water, denying access to the common good of water.

Taken separately, each of those assaults would be cause for grave concern. Taken together, they pose a threat to the collective survival of humans and non-humans alike. Defending water and the right of all forms of life to access to water, in Mesopotamia, is now a critical civic duty: without water, there can be no life.

Water is a crucial element of our culture and spirituality. Many legends, myths, songs, poems, prayers, and dances are centered on water. This has been the case since humans settled in Mesopotamia up to 13.000 years ago.

Within Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran – the four states through which the rivers of the Mesopotamian Basin flow – the multiple crises affecting water are no accident. For the past century or more, governments, business interests and the military have recklessly pursued policies that have polluted and degraded the region’s rivers and ecosystems.



Hundred of thousands have been forcibly displaced from their homes to make way for dams and water transfer projects. The riverine environment has been severely degraded, threatening the survival of many species of flora and fauna; the health of citizens has been put at risk; and economic and social inequalities have increased.

None of this has gone unchallenged. Throughout the Mesopotamian region, vibrant movements for environmental and social justice have long sought to exercise their constitutional rights to campaign for access to clean and safe water. In many instances, they have been met by arrest, imprisonment or worse.

Committed to working for peaceful, sustainable and equitable solutions to these multiple injustices, over 150 water activists from the region, together with like-minded colleagues from Africa, Asia, the Americas and Europe, gathered at the University of Sulaimani in the Kurdistan region of Iraq from 6-8 April 2019 to participate in the first ever Mesopotamian Water Forum.

We met in the spirit of solidarity and mutual learning. We interrogated the many causes of water scarcity, exploring the complex ways in which demand for water is mediated through economic and social systems. We learned how the intensive construction of dams and other water infrastructure schemes have created water scarcity.

We explored alternative ways of managing water in the interests of the many, not the few. We heard of new initiatives, notably in the Rojava/Northeastern region of war-torn Syria, to evolve new participatory approaches to water governance, involving all citizens – regardless of ethnicity, gender or religion – in bottom-up, consensual approaches to decision-making.

We people of Mesopotamia – and the allies present at the Mesopotamian Water Forum – affirmed that, despite our diverse cultural, social, political and environmental realities, our struggles are one, and we expressed our solidarity with all those who struggle for water justice in the region and internationally.

We resolved to:

1. Challenge destructive and exploitative water policies in the region, recognising the particular burden on women and other oppressed identities, and addressing their underlying causes.
2. Mobilise support for negotiated agreements under legally binding international law that would ensure the equitable sharing of water of the Euphrates and Tigris for the benefit of all life, both human and non-human, in the region;
3. Stand against the use of water as a weapon for hegemony and to work to ensure that water is a tool for cooperation and sustainable peace. Upstream states in Mesopotamia must ensure the rights of people downstream to water.
4. Call for an end to the recent cutting of water flows by Turkey and Iran to Syria and Iraq.
5. Call to prevent the flooding of the 12000-year-old city of Hasankeyf caused by the Ilisu Dam and to preserve the unique natural and cultural heritage of the Iraqi Mesopotamian Marshlands from degradation.



6. Build alliances, nationally, regionally and internationally to evolve policies and practices that would democratise water management.
7. Ensure that water is used in ways that prioritise the collective right of all, rather than the few, to survival;
8. Considering that most diverted water goes to irrigation, the following points are crucial: For farmers in a subsistence economy, clean water is vital, which is why in areas close to water no chemicals should be used. As hybrid seeds and GMO seeds require too much water and harm the ecosystems, local seeds should be used. Animal shelter should not be built close to water so that no serious harm is caused to waters. The water used in agriculture should not be contaminated by industry. Irrigation close to the water course is feasible, but no water should be transferred to areas far away from the water course. Thus, instead of transferring water to plants, plants appropriate to the climate and precipitation regime should be cultivated.
9. The pollution and destruction of the Tigris River starts in an intensive way far upstream. One reason for this is that the river has no river status in the upstream stretch until Bismil city. We call for an international campaign to declare the river status for the upper-most stretch of the Tigris River.
10. To strengthen the Save the Tigris Campaign (STC) as a network through which water activists in Mesopotamia can exchange information and analysis, explore commonalities and differences, prepare common statements and reports and organize common activities/campaigns.
11. Develop the Mesopotamian Water Forum as an open space for advocating for new decision-making processes at municipal, national and regional levels through which environmentally and socially just water policies can be inclusively formulated and promoted.
12. Implement the specific recommendations made by workshops at the Forum.
13. We have committed to organise the 2nd Mesopotamian Water Forum in Diyarbakir (Amed), Turkey in the near future.

Main contributing organizations:

Save the Tigris Campaign (STC)
Humat Dijla (Tigris Keepers), Iraq
Mesopotamia Ecology Movement, North Kurdistan
Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative (ICSSI), Iraq
Initiative to Keep Hasankeyf Alive, Turkey
People's Campaign to Save the Kind Zagros, Iran
Waterkeepers Iraq, Kurdistan Region of Iraq
Make Rojava Green Again Campaign, Rojava/Northeast Syria
Ecology Union, Turkey
Mountain Watch, Iran
DOZ international, Northeast Syria
KAREZE Environmental Organization, Iran
Mlakawa Organisation, Kurdistan Region of Iraq
Nature Kurdistan, Kurdistan Region of Iraq



Ecopeace, Middle East
Lebanon Eco Movement, Lebanon
Rivers Without Boundaries, East and North Asia
Movement of Defence of Water, Land and Environment (MODATIMA), Chile
Un Ponte Per, Italy
Corner House, UK
International Rivers, USA
First Ecosocialist International, North America
Water Grabbing Observatory, Italy
Italian Forum of Water Movement, Italy

Website: www.savethetigris.org/international-mesopotamian-water-forum

Photos: www.facebook.com/pg/save.tigris.and.iraqi.marshes/photos/?tab=album&album_id=2627274960633099