

In MENA, make every drop of water count



Figure 1 : Egyptian countryside near the Nile irrigation canal. Photo credit: Shutterstock/Aleksandr Todorovic

In the Middle East and North Africa region, water is truly life.

[For centuries, the region was renowned for its innovation in conserving water and delivering it to people.](#) Think of the waterwheels of Hama in Syria, early irrigation dams in Yemen, and the medieval fountains and urban wells of Fez and Marrakesh in Morocco. Such achievements were technological marvels, far ahead of their time.

Fast forward to the present, and the picture changes dramatically. The region is facing a slowly creeping water emergency, with some populations already acutely at risk. [The Middle East and North Africa, or MENA, has the world's lowest average annual water availability per person,](#) equal to 480 cubic meters in 2023, less than 10 percent the global average, and below the international definition of water scarcity. And as water from rivers and lakes has become increasingly scarce, farmers and others are putting an unsustainable burden on groundwater, accelerating the crisis. Almost a quarter of those in the region now live in areas with high or extremely high stress on groundwater.

This scarcity will only worsen in the coming years. We'll see this as the demand for water grows due to population and economic growth and increased urbanization as well as with the greater impacts of climate change, which particularly affect water resources, including through evaporation and demand for cooling.

[The good news is that many countries in MENA are already moving ahead to conserve this most precious resource, and others are starting to follow.](#) There are now bountiful opportunities that can pave the way for a more water-secure future for the entire region.

The successful approaches of some countries give a clear indication of the path forward.

First, we must get back to MENA's roots as a technological leader and invest in innovation. The region should embrace new digital technologies that help enhance water management, connect citizens to improved water services, and accelerate economic growth. On the supply side, desalination and re-use of treated wastewater are emerging as key approaches to boost supply. MENA now accounts for more than 53 percent of the global desalination capacity. While the cost of these technologies has come down significantly through innovation, we need further innovation to ensure that the relatively high cost of desalinated water doesn't burden the poor and the poorest countries. In parallel, it will be essential for the region to dramatically improve its water use efficiency and to reduce losses.

The region also needs to urgently **prioritize climate-smart practices** for water management. This includes increasing capacity to gather accurate climate and hydrological data, which can allow systems to adapt to changes in precipitation patterns and the greater frequency of droughts and floods. This information can help to inform decision-making about how to allocate water resources and prepare for such emergencies.

Countries can also steer water policy to **boost job-creating sectors**. These include climate-smart, water-efficient agriculture for exports and emerging approaches to the energy-water nexus, such as pumped storage hydropower and the use of renewable energy in water services. Prioritizing these sectors can help accelerate positive change in water management while generating much-needed jobs and building skills.

For many countries, this shift is going to require a **wide-ranging reform of the water sector**. Much of the region's infrastructure is creaky, as are the institutions that support it. Some water distribution systems in the region see losses of up to 50 percent, making loss reduction the first order of business for these countries. The region also has some of the lowest service fees for water in the world, and at 2 percent, the highest proportion of gross domestic product spent on public water subsidies. Countries will need to transition to more sustainable pricing that discourages waste while protecting the poor and vulnerable. At the same time, incentives and innovation are needed to increase private sector participation in reviving and rebuilding infrastructure, including through guarantees.

Finally, **strengthened cooperation on water resources across borders** could lead to immense benefits across the region. More than 60 percent of MENA's water resources are shared between two or more countries, presenting a significant opportunity for collaboration and partnership to better manage these vital resources. A good first step is discussion and knowledge-sharing—of which there is a rich history in the region.

This is why we are heartened to see countries coming together this week for the first regional Water Forum in Kuwait, co-organized by the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development and the World Bank. [This forum offers an excellent opportunity to address the region's big-picture water challenges, including through strategic development finance and public-private partnerships.](#) It also reflects the deepening of our institutions' strategic partnership, with the recognition that collaboration is essential to tackle this challenge and that delivering impact at scale requires mobilizing all stakeholders.

The Arab Fund is leveraging its deep, hands-on experience that extends over half a century, and its financial capacity to address water scarcity in the region. It provided over \$8.1 billion to finance 149 water-related projects. These projects have benefited millions of people and helped Arab countries develop more than 3,800 kilometers of wastewater networks. These networks treat 6 million cubic meters of wastewater daily, crucial for enhancing food security and protecting people and the environment from diseases.

The World Bank is actively committed to helping countries in the region lay the groundwork for a more water-resilient future. In Morocco, a rural water supply project supported by the World Bank has connected more than 1.1 million people to a potable water supply. In Egypt, an innovative approach to rural sanitation has ensured that thousands of households have had a voice in project planning and implementation. And in Jordan, a sector-wide effort is helping to systematically reduce losses and provide sufficient water to the population in one of the most water-stressed places in the world.

We are convinced that such efforts will work. And [we are convinced that by working together, we can ensure that water is conserved and used wisely for sustainable development and the prosperity of future generations—in this region where every drop counts.](#)

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