

# **WATER MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES IN PALESTINE**

*By PENGON – Friends of the Earth Palestine*

## **BACKGROUND**

For the past five decades of Israeli occupation, water management in the West Bank and Gaza has been constrained by several political, technical and economic factors. Management of public resources, including water, has been completely within Israeli hands; decisions were made with little or no regard for Palestinian interests and needs. Even before the occupation, civic regulations were frequently over-ruled by military orders that confiscated water sources and banned public works to improve water and sanitation services to Palestinian communities. Israel's strict restrictions on the quantity of water supplied to Palestinians and the lack of investments in the infrastructures (physical water losses reach 50% in some areas), have created a distrustful, antagonistic relationship between the public and the authorities. Furthermore, it has distorted public perception of management and protection of public goods and properties. Getting involved in public decision making became increasingly controversial as it was seen as implicit acceptance of the Israeli occupation.

This has adversely affected the performance of the water sector and has resulted in a large gap between the services provided and those demanded. It has also created a fragmented and uncoordinated water supply management structure. The main characteristic of this is a top down approach with little or no room for public participation. It has also kept water use levels in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) at their lowest minimum with a decreasing mode, without considering the growth and development needs of the growing population. Despite all of that, there were few successful public water management models, which was a de facto operating bodies prior to the occupation. They managed to continue their operation with relative success under such harsh conditions.

However, the shift from the era of full occupation by the Israelis to an era of partial occupation during the Oslo process in the early 90s, has resulted in further complication and confusion for the public. On the one hand, the values about managing public goods and properties which people internalised as a result of a long-term occupation were not easily discarded. On the other hand, Israel remained in full control of the process of water management. Despite acknowledging the Palestinian Water Rights, Israel never agreed to quantify such rights. Nor did Israel agree to develop an independent mechanism for the Palestinians to manage their own water resources.

Palestinians, however, developed national plans and laws to govern water management in the OPT. The law proposes to establish four public water and wastewater management utilises in the OPT. However, until they can be realized, the current management systems, in which municipalities and village councils provide water and sanitation services, will continue. Most of these councils lack adequate infrastructures, technical skills, and human and financial resource capacity. Therefore, they operate under a year round deficit.

Current statistics show that 29% of the Palestinian communities (7% of population) are not connected to drinking water. In the areas connected to a water supply, 15% of the population are not served. This results in 23% of the total population not being supplied with water supply in the West Bank (PHG 2003). In addition, 60% of the urban areas are connected to sewerage systems while almost all rural areas and 40% of urban areas are not yet connected. The existing on-site sewage disposal in rural areas does not accommodate the vast increase in wastewater generated by the population. (Almost 96% of households in the West Bank villages use cesspits.) Thus, untreated sewage contaminates groundwater, wadi beds and agricultural fields which causes serious community and environmental health problems.

Despite the fact that the total renewable water resources in the West Bank and Gaza is estimated at 722 MCM / year, in the form of groundwater resources (Palestinians are not allocated their rightful shares from surface water), Palestinians are allowed to use only 250 MCM / year and the rest is used by Israel.

#### **CURRENT WATER MANAGEMENT MODELS**

In the West Bank, the private sector is given no opportunity to interfere in the water supply sector. Public water utilities, municipal and village councils both own and operate the water supply sector. Water supply management can be grouped into two main categories:

##### **1. Delegated public management model**

In the delegated public management model, the system is built up and operated by a water utility. A water utility also operates the infrastructure as a permanent concessionaire. In this model, water utilities are owned by group of municipalities (shareholders) and thus it is a public organization, although it may be operated on a commercial basis.

This model was developed in the West Bank during the time of Jordanian rule prior to 1967. Two major utilities have been established. The Jerusalem Water Undertaking (JWU) currently runs the water sector in Ramallah and part of Jerusalem Governorates. The Water Supply and Sewage Authority (WSSA) runs the water supply and sanitation sector in the Bethlehem Governorate.

##### **2. Direct public management model**

In the direct management model, the municipalities or village councils manage the water services. Municipalities are responsible for funding the current investment and capital cost. Capital investments are almost completely funded by external financial aids (national or international development agencies), and municipalities are the owners of the infrastructure and the operators of the system. Direct public management is the most dominant management mode in Palestine.

The following table summarises the number of water supply providers in Palestine, and the populations they serve, with their supply volume under both management models.

Table (1): Size of the current management models in West Bank

| <b>Management Mode</b> |        | <b>Service volume Mcm..</b> | <b>Water Supplier Number</b> | <b>Number of Served communities</b> | <b>Served Population</b> |
|------------------------|--------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Delegated Management   | Public | 7.744                       | 2                            | 59                                  | 272873                   |
| Direct Management      | Public | 30387                       | 272                          | 299                                 | 1188776                  |
| Non served             |        | 0                           | 132                          | 150                                 | 110017                   |
| Total                  |        | 38131                       | 406                          | 508                                 | 1571666                  |

Source: Modified from Salih, 1998

#### **OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

Both public models are functional in the OPT but the first model is more efficient as it is able to provide better services.. This is because delegated public management is more autonomous, it has more technical capacity and runs on a cost recovery basis for the services provided.

Efficiency is lower with the direct public management mode. The customer base is smaller in general, most of the municipal and village councils do not have a separate division to run the water management. Budgets are not differentiated among the various services provided or the revenue collected. It is difficult for this management model to be run on a sustainable basis. Development in the infrastructure needs financial support from external sources. This is also the case in the first model, though to a lesser degree. Donor agencies provide money as grants and loans, especially the World Bank and the European Investment Bank. Although such loans are soft and long term, they increase the national debt. Palestine is becoming yet another country with huge external debt that ensures it will remain underdeveloped and dependent on charity and other, longer-tem loans to repay their current loans.

In this context, and with the special situation in Palestine where Israel still controls almost all important issues, a clear economic policy must be adopted whereby the production sector borrow money rather than the basic services. Then the Palestinian production sector might invest locally in the services sector and the Government would be responsible to regulate and facilitate the issue in transparent and efficient manner.

In addition, there is a need for democratic tools and mechanisms whereby public sector performance is clearly monitored and openly reported. The public must play its role as responsible actors. For this to happen, awareness campaigns are needed to educate people about their rights and obligations and to help them move from the misconceptions inherited from the pervious era of occupation to those of national institution building and management.

#### **THE MESSAGE**

Accumulated knowledge and capacity can create the potential for sustainable management of both resources and supply services in Palestine. However, with continued occupation, oppression, control of resources, and destruction of infrastructure, investment opportunities and sustainable management cannot be expected. Economic deterioration will continue, poverty will increase as will social unrest, all of which will render any services provided unsustainable. Hence, no matter what programmes are

introduced, they will never provide the level of development that enables people to move from being consumers to being producers. Development will merely be a reaction to humanitarian issues and no more. Accordingly, we urge our friends and solidarity movements to increase the pressure to end the Israeli Occupation. This will enable the Palestinians to run their lives with dignity and freedom. And to be able to claim their civic, political, legal and other rights as do other nations around the world.

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