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## YEMEN: Time running out for solution to water crisis



Photo: [Annasofie Flamand/IRIN](#)

Access to water in Yemen is far lower than in the rest of the region

SANA'A, 13 August 2012 (IRIN) - Under a staircase, clinging to a wall of Sana'a's Grand Mosque, groups of women and children lug plastic canisters to the leaky spigots of a public fountain. Some small children struggle with canisters nearly their size as they weave slowly between the fountain and the pushcarts used to wheel the water back home.

Whether in cities or villages, this is how millions of Yemenis secure their day's supply of water.

Since few can afford to pay for water to be pumped to their building, public urban fountains, which are free, remain the only option for most. Umm Husein, a resident of the capital Sana'a, said she has tap water only once or twice a week. Trips to the communal fountain - taking time out of work or studies - involve her whole family. "The women, the children, every day we go to the fountain to get water," she said.

Water and sanitation are chronic problems in Yemen, where, on average, each Yemeni only has access to about 140cu.m. of water per year for all uses. (The Middle East average is about 1,000cu.m. per person per year.) In recent years, the government of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh had taken strides to improve water access in Yemen, but the political turbulence that arose from last year's uprising has pushed water down the new government's list of priorities, according to aid workers and a government employee.

### **Changing priorities**

Two years ago, Yemen's General Rural Water Authority (GRWA) commissioned a general assessment of existing water projects and coverage. The organizations that took part in the assessment came to a collective decision to focus on rainwater harvesting in Yemen's highlands, and on water drilling in the coastal and desert areas. Yet the ensuing political chaos put a halt to progress in implementing solutions, according to Abdulwali El Shami, an engineer in the government's Public Works Project (PWP) in Sana'a.

Beset with crises on various fronts, the new president, Abd Rabbu Mansoor Hadi, has put little energy towards resolving the water crisis threatening the majority of Yemenis. Indeed, Ghassan Madieh, a UNICEF water specialist in Sana'a, said he did not "see any serious attention being given to the issue of water scarcity, or the low coverage in water and sanitation."

Jerry Farrell, country director of Save the Children in Yemen, echoed this assessment: "[In June], the Ministry of Planning rolled out its plan for the next 20 months...and water was at the bottom of the list."

Though solutions exist, the will and attention necessary to put them into practice remain absent, observers say. Farrell said that without a greater governmental commitment to water issues, international aid organizations dealing with water will not be able to work effectively in the country. The government must also provide water subsidies for the extremely poor while water infrastructure is developed, he added.

### **A country run dry**

The spectre of a country run dry looms over Yemen's nearly 25 million inhabitants.

With its streams and natural aquifers shallower every day, Sana'a itself risks becoming the first capital in the world to run out of a viable water supply. The water table in the city has dropped far beyond sustainable levels, El Shami said, because of an exploding

population, lack of water resource management and, most of all, unregulated drilling. Where Sana'a's water table was 30 meters below the surface in the 1970s, he said, it has now dropped to 1,200 meters in some areas.

The water supply in this largely arid country has been the source of decades-long ethnic conflicts, particularly among nomadic groups. In the northern governorate of Al-Jawf, a blood feud between two prominent local groups has continued unabated for nearly three decades, largely a result of the contested placement of a well on their territorial border.

**“ It will be very painful to the Yemeni people. They will have to make choices about survival, because water is life and water is survival. ”**

Abdulwali El Jilani, a water specialist in Sana'a with the Community Livelihood Project, a programme to improve water access funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), warned that as water supply diminishes, tensions will only rise: “Water is and will be the reason for powerful conflicts in the future.”

Lack of access to improved water supply has been responsible for the spread of water-borne diseases on a scale not witnessed in decades, according to UNICEF's Madieh. Dengue fever, diarrhea and cholera, for example, have spread at alarming rates in rural areas where access to clean water is limited. In 2011 alone, more than 30,000 Yemenis were suffering from acute watery diarrhea.

The vast majority of the water in Yemen - as much as 90 percent - goes to small-scale farming, at a time when agriculture contributes only 6 percent of GDP, according to Madieh. Though few precise statistics are available on the subject, Madieh said that 50 percent of all agricultural water goes to the [cultivation of khat](#), a narcotic plant chewed by most Yemenis. As such, almost 45 percent of all water in Yemen is used to cultivate a plant that feeds no one, in a country where almost half of the population is food insecure.

While the water situation in many cities is dire, it is even more distressing in rural areas. According to the latest rural water survey by GRWA, completed this year, access to improved water supply - piped water, protected springs and wells - is limited to 34 percent of rural areas, compared to 70 percent of urban areas.

Village women spend most of each day trekking many kilometers along unpaved roads to reach the few wells that have not yet run dry. Many of them also collect water from streams polluted by waste, which they attempt to eliminate with rudimentary filtering systems.

## **Future steps**

But Yemen is by no means devoid of strategies to improve water access. El Shami said that the PWP is building rainwater-harvesting tanks in rural areas so that villagers don't have to travel hours to collect water. These tanks are fitted with filtering systems, providing clean water in areas where it is hard to come by.

"We are trying as much as possible to go the natural way," El Shami said, referring to efforts not to drill or truck in water, common methods of obtaining water in areas particularly tight on the resource. "We don't want villagers to spend so much effort just to collect water."

El Jilani, the water specialist, said Yemeni activists are trying to create local awareness of the country's water emergency. Organizing regional workshops on water conservation techniques is one method activists hope will build local engagement on the issue. "There's a role to be played by citizens too," he noted, "in adopting a path to rebuild and improve water administration in their areas."

Yet experts agree that if Yemen's leadership doesn't take meaningful action soon, the consequences will be devastating.

"In 10 years' time, we will have only surgical solutions left," Madih said. "It will be very painful to the Yemeni people. They will have to make choices about survival, because water is life and water is survival."

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