



Hussein Okla fills a water tank with water supplied by Oxfam at an informal settlement for Syrian refugees in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley.
Photo: Sam Tarling/Oxfam

SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN LEBANON

Promoting dialogue in humanitarian and development WASH programmes

Oxfam's work in Lebanon, both on humanitarian WASH and more long-term water development programmes, uses social accountability mechanisms to assess community needs, empower citizens and promote dialogue among affected stakeholders. This strategy has helped to unlock some tensions in an effort to provide basic rights and services to vulnerable people. However the situation in many settings remains fragile, and further efforts are needed to promote dialogue and to anchor consultation processes to the water sector dynamics in Lebanon.

1 INTRODUCTION

Lebanon's water resources are limited in terms of both quantity and quality. This is a result of mismanagement, ageing infrastructure, inadequate investment within a sectarian political system, coupled with depleting water resources and climate change. These challenges and constraints have resulted in limited provision of basic services and unauthorized tapping of water sources. Consequently, public water service providers operate at an annual financial deficit, with low cost recovery for the services provided. Local populations have a lack of trust in public services in general, and water services in particular. With the Syrian refugee crisis, an influx of some 1.5 million Syrian refugees since 2011 has put further strain on water resources, incurring an increased demand on water provision by an estimated 8 to 12 percent.¹

Oxfam works on both humanitarian and more long-term development programmes in Lebanon. Syrian refugee communities residing in informal tented settlements (ITS) are provided with water and sanitation services and infrastructure, and communities are engaged to ensure hygiene practices are improved to mitigate public health risks. Oxfam also works with national water service providers, the water establishments, to improve existing water infrastructure for the host communities – and with citizens to raise awareness of water service provision topics – contributing to overall cost recovery of the service provider.

This case study aims to show how social accountability mechanisms are crucial in coordinating efforts and ensuring effectiveness of water interventions that support both refugees and host communities alike.

2 THE SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGE

Much of the water infrastructure in Lebanon is aging and experiencing major losses. These losses are both technical and due to households tapping directly into the water networks for supply without being subscribed to the water establishments. This situation has resulted over the years in an unreliable service and poor quality water supply. In addition, lack of trust of the general public in the government, and particularly the water service providers, as well as the absence of complaint mechanisms, has meant that water users are not inclined to pay their annual water consumption bills. This compounds the challenges water establishments face, both technical and financial, in providing the country with a reliable and good quality water supply that the public perceives as sufficient for both their domestic and potable needs. As well as the challenges to implement government policies for Lebanese populations, water establishments are faced with the added challenge of service provision to refugees residing in ITSs. Humanitarian actors have provided water to ITSs using water trucking since 2011, in the absence of a public water supply. This has differentially empowered the parallel and informal water market, which uses the same water sources as those of the water establishments, but charges a higher cost to individuals and to humanitarian agencies. Syrian refugees remain highly dependent on aid and assistance. Both Lebanese citizens and Syrian refugees now turn to aid agencies to identify solutions and to facilitate negotiations to resolve tensions between

communities and government, as they find themselves unable to influence the quality and quantity of water services that they are entitled to receive or to shape these services according to their needs and preferences.

3 OXFAM'S STRATEGY

Humanitarian projects

Oxfam's WASH (water sanitation and hygiene) humanitarian response in Lebanon focuses on providing refugees residing in ITSs with safe and adequate access to water and sanitation services and facilities, and on the promotion of hygiene practices. These activities are implemented directly in consultation with ITS refugee communities, through feedback and referral mechanisms that have been established with them. Community structures – peer groups, community hygiene volunteers, community technical volunteers and women's groups – have also been set up to empower communities in addressing the risks they face and increasing their ability and self-sufficiency on the long term with regards to WASH-related services. However, they still default to aid agencies, which are in some instances the direct service providers and in others are brokers between themselves and contracted service providers. The challenge, when services are handed over, will be to continue to have a structured and accountable mechanism for complaints, concerns and resolutions.

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis response, all Oxfam WASH facilities are designed and continuously developed to meet the needs of the refugee community. Initially, and through focus group discussions, Oxfam became aware that women in ITSs did not feel comfortable or safe using the available latrines. These concerns were taken seriously, and sanitation facilities were redesigned accordingly. Latrines are now placed closer and with the door facing the tent; they are fitted with a solar lamp to ensure lighting, and equipped with a door handle and lock to ensure privacy. All pathways were cleared of pipe works and debris to ensure safe access. The design was also later upgraded to include a rope and handle to enable access for elderly people. In addition, each household in every ITS under Oxfam's coverage is provided with a hotline number to communicate with Oxfam and make referrals as necessary. Tracking of referrals remains a challenge, however.

Oxfam is a reference point providing an official platform that vulnerable people in these fragile settings trust, which is extremely valuable. An example of this is women reporting to Oxfam on sexual harassment they suffered from a water trucker. In these cases, women are usually too afraid and stay silent. Oxfam can use its position to speak on behalf of vulnerable communities and lodge complaints to the authorities. In this instance, Oxfam worked with the municipality to negotiate the termination of the trucker's contact and identify a new, more suitable water trucker. This shows the importance of understanding the power dynamics and acting as an 'honest broker' among different stakeholders in order to ensure accountability not only of authorities, but also of formal and informal service providers.

The community structures are the most promising aspect of Oxfam's strategy for addressing WASH needs in the long term. The various structures are provided

'Water is vital for us. Without this project, we would have been forced to buy water and this would have drastically increased our expenses'

Naser Ahmad Al aswad (beneficiary)

with knowledge and training to help them identify threats to WASH, to facilitate information dissemination in their communities and even maintain WASH infrastructure. These structures are young and are expected to grow gradually over the years in strength and effectiveness. However, some achievements have already been noted. In 2016, some residents in an ITS were being harassed by the host community in their locality for the disposal of solid waste in the communal bins of the village. This was a result of the municipality not being willing to collect the bins at the ITS, since it was located far away and incurred high fuel costs. The refugees needed a solution; their peer group met with the municipality and agreed to situate their waste bins closer, thus facilitating the achievement of a good waste collection scheme. Where there is no official mechanism or structure in place to deal with such an increased demand on services, in some instances INGO's such as Oxfam can bridge the gap between formal and informal providers and the affected populations. In many post-recovery settings this remains the main approach, while trying to build in more established mechanisms for the future.

Development projects

Oxfam is currently also working on a medium-scale infrastructure project that includes the rehabilitation of a 14km water supply network for the village of Chtaura, which has an estimated population of 5,600 residents, 1,000 of which are Syrian refugees. In addition to the infrastructural works, the project includes components that address the ability of the water establishment to monitor subscriptions using a developed database and to measure water consumption using the installed water meters. Oxfam informed the residents of Chtaura of the importance of cost recovery and encouraged them to pay their annual water bills. This awareness-raising was supported by the evidence generated by an environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA) conducted partly under a government requirement, but also as a means to ensure an understanding of the socioeconomic context and the needs of the community. In doing this, Oxfam supports the wider use of government systems and encourages dialogue between consumers and providers.

The ESIA indicated that, on average, 80 percent of water use is from the official water establishments. The other 20 percent comes from informal water providers (the water truckers), and is approximately five times more expensive than water from the water establishment. The community pays more because they consider the public water supply unclean, unreliable or insufficient. Unknown to them, the informal providers supply their water from the same source; therefore the community is paying five times more for the same water. This evidence helped the community understand how and from where their water was supplied, and this encouraged them to subscribe to the public supply, which would support the capacity of the water establishment to improve its service.

Despite the positive accomplishments of the project, social challenges continue to be faced, especially with the upstream village of Jdita where the water source for the network is located. Residents of Jdita feel that providing downstream villages with water would ultimately result in a reduction of the amount of water available to them. Oxfam facilitated community meetings and consultations with influential stakeholders. The provision of technical evidence to Jdita to explain the water supply scheme has helped to unlock some tensions. However, the situation in this

case remains fragile, as it is unfortunately the case with most water conflicts around the world.

Promoting dialogue at the national level

Oxfam's experience in Lebanon in the water sector has highlighted the weak coordination and dialogue among government institutions and agencies, water service providers, experts, academics, and practitioners. In 2016, Oxfam organized the first Lebanon Water Forum, an annual event aimed at providing a platform for all stakeholders to discuss issues related to water resources and water services. Some of the topics discussed were: water tariffs and cost recovery mechanisms, metering impact on the level of non-revenue water, management of public procurement, and water governance and integrity. The forum was recognized as a success among the many attendees, largely for providing an open dialogue between various stakeholders to tackle the issues that have been prevalent for many years. With so many more actors (civil society, contractors and the private sector) working in support of the service sector, accountability and even more crucial. .

The Lebanon Water Forum 2017 is currently being planned. This year, the intention is that the event focuses on water service provision to host and refugee families affected by the Syrian refugee crisis.

4 KEY LEARNINGS

- **Focussing on building infrastructure alone is not sustainable:** Consultations with the communities and empowering local service providers are also needed to get to an agreement on how systems will be sustained by both parties (i.e. providers perform proper maintenance; consumers pay their bills, etc.). There needs to be an independent platform or structure for this to continue in the future when INGO's exit.
- **Engaging with local communities takes time:** Changing people's minds and habits requires a good understanding of the culture and continuous dialogue.
- **Households are willing to pay for public water** when services become more reliable and better quality, and billing systems more transparent. With so many providers out there, it is important to understand where the water is being sourced from, and to hold informal providers to account. Providing evidence is key to building trust between formal and informal providers and consumers for this to happen.
- **Coordination of different actors:** All actors working in the same area (including upstream and downstream communities) need to share information and collaborate in synergizing efforts.
- **Social accountability approaches can work in both humanitarian and development scenarios, but require resources** to integrate activities related to transparency, accountability and participation into project plans and budgets.
- **Power dynamics need to be understood:** Interventions should be adapted to the political and cultural context and ensure that all stakeholders (authorities, formal and informal service providers and communities) fulfil their roles and responsibilities and hold each other accountable.

NOTES

- 1 MOE/EU/UNDP (2014), Lebanon Environmental Assessment of the Syrian Conflict & Priority Interventions. URL: www.undp.org/content/dam/lebanon/docs/Energy%20and%20Environment/Publications/EASC-WEB.pdf

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