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HADI TABBARA

Published: 19/05/2014 04:22 PM | Updated: 21/05/2014 12:45 PM

Thirsty for solutions

It's time to rethink the Blue Gold Plan



When confronted with a controversial issue facing our nation, one must always know the facts and understand all the factors and the stakeholders in order to form an unbiased opinion. When one is tackling a sensitive subject such as the deteriorating state of our water resources and its effect on the very livelihood of the citizen, then the problem takes on a bigger dimension: that of national security. Water issues, then, must **be included in Lebanon's national defense strategy, simply because the looming water crisis will have a direct effect on every sector of the economy.** According to a recent [World Resources Institute report](#), Lebanon is among the top 36 most water-stressed countries in the world, immediately preceded by Jordan, Yemen, and Palestine.

For the reasons mentioned above, Lebanon is losing its image of abundant rivers and crystal clear springs. And without a firm water security policy, the decline in both **quantity and quality of water will severely affect citizens' well-being** and health. Agriculture production will also decrease and migration from rural areas will pressure urban and semi-urban centers. Tourism, too, will suffer and entire industries will downsize or vanish.

I was invited to attend the presentation of the Blue Gold Plan in Beirut by a colleague of mine in January. Prior to the meeting, I was not too familiar with the Civic Influence Hub or their Blue Gold plan. I must admit that I was quite impressed at the enthusiasm of the **large crowd in the room and their "thirst" for someone, anyone, to save Lebanon's** precious waters. The crowd seemed quite parched for water and that Blue Gold provided the fountain. But I was skeptical. Who are these people? How did they succeed in attracting such a large crowd? How did they manage to gather people from both sides of the aisle?

Ordinary citizen from all walks of life – students, employees, heads of households, farmers, businessmen and -women, and retirees were all present. All were offered a **close look, in appealing displays of numbers and figures, of Lebanon's current and future water supply and demand and the Blue Gold Plan for achieving water sustainability. Notwithstanding one's opinion on the merit of these numbers, statistics on** water usually familiar only to specialists were now in the hands of regular Lebanese. Blue Gold succeeded in making ordinary people talk about water issues and debate these figures in their homes, cafes, and the workplace. But I left still questioning whether this group of concerned citizens is genuinely interested in revitalizing the water sector and in returning clean water to its rightful place: The Tap.

I put off thinking about answers to these questions until I was invited by CIH to attend a recent technical presentation on the Blue Gold Plan. The presentation was by a French water expert who painstakingly criticized the plan and offered suggested improvements. I realized that the answers to some of my questions were unfolding: if that group of citizens was not genuinely interested in scientific truth, they would not be welcoming such an open criticism of their plan, let alone to invite a group of experts to listen to such criticism.

I now turn to the crucial question: does the Blue Gold plan call for complete privatization of the water sector leading to a monopoly or does it offer a plan for saving the waters of Lebanon? I believe the answer centers around the involvement of the private sector in running public utilities, widely known as Public Private Partnership (PPP). Except here it takes on a far more controversial dimension: their involvement in a critical natural resource considered as dear as life itself. Opponents of PPP in the water sector claim that water should not be privatized and traded for commercial purposes, that private sector involvement will yield to price fixing and inequities of access, foreign control over fundamental natural resources, exclusion of communities from decisions about their own resources, risks to the ecosystem, and even increased corruption. On the other

hand, proponents see PPP as the only way of reducing if not eliminating corruption in the sector through the achievement of both operational and managerial efficiency, transparency of sector performance, and faster access to financial capital and specialized knowledge. Their arguments are strengthened by failures and underperformance of the water services in Lebanon.

Unfortunately, opponents' concerns are legitimate. There are examples from both developed and developing countries where this partnership with the private sector did not improve access to clean and affordable water, and in certain instances resulted in heightened corruption. But there are also success stories from many countries, including one right here in Lebanon. The involvement of the private sector in the provision of water services in Tripoli enabled it to become the only city in Lebanon where water was provided 24/7. What is clear from success stories and failures is that **PPP "is not a one-size-fits-all solution"** – different approaches exist and have to be tailored to the water sector maturity and local environment.

The government of Lebanon's (CDR) recent proposal to study these approaches to determine the best PPP plan for the country is the right step in the right direction.

I believe it is time to balance the discussion, time for open and constructive debate between the leadership of CIH and authors of the Blue Gold plan and those who are opposed to it. Most of all, it is time to call for a conference where scientific arguments and not ideology or demagoguery prevail.

Hadi Tabbara holds a Ph.D. in water resources. He is also an agricultural and water consultant.