

# EU Helps Palestinians to cope with water scarcity problem. Yet, more needs to be done

Water shortage is a crucial problem of biggest concern for Palestinians. One way to deal with this crisis is adequate treatment of wastewater that would limit the deterioration of existing freshwater resources. Different partners from across the borders of Middle Eastern countries, including Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, aim to exchange experience and come up with innovative solutions. Each of them comes up with what seems to be more compatible to conditions in their respective countries.

Text and Photographs by Elias Zananiri

**People are un-receptive to the idea of eating vegetables irrigated with treated wastewater. Therefore, they need an educational campaign to explain this issue.**

**Ramallah** - In Palestine, Birzeit University's Civil Engineering Department started its pilot project for wastewater treatment. Department Chairman, Dr. Omar Zimmo, said his department first conducted a study to assess the environmental conditions in the Palestinian territories, characterized the problems, and prepared an action plan that led to the creation of the wastewater treatment plant in the village of Ein Sinya, Ramallah district. The project, though pilot for now, has the capacity to produce up to 50 cubic meters a day. It can be copied to other parts of the Palestinian territories, provided all parties concerned, including the Palestinian Authority, the donor countries and the Israeli authorities work together to make it happen. Most of the areas that fit the characteristics of a wastewater treatment plant are in Area C, which remains under Israel's full control.

"A single Israeli army jeep can hinder the work for an unlimited period, causing some donors to stay back," explained Zimmo. He said the plant location was chosen in a remote village and not on the campus in order to "widen the scope of this project and involve as many civil society organizations, mainly local village councils." Wastewater downstream flowing from a number of surrounding villages in the Ramallah district down to Ein Sinya makes this village the most convenient for the plant.

▲ *Salah Eddine Assaf is one of the farmers whose land is next to the water reservoir that was built at Qabatya with EU aid.*



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The wastewater treatment plant in Bidya was set to increase the volume of water available for agriculture.

▶ Dr. Omar Zimmo, University of Birzeit



vegetables that are eaten only after being cooked.

**The treatment plant in Bidya double scored: it reduced both health and environment problems**

Another partner in EU-sponsored water management projects in Palestine is the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee, PARC, which conducted a number of programs in the fields of wastewater treatment, cisterns, and wells development. One of their projects is the rehabilitation of a production well in the town of Qabatya in the Jenin district. The purpose of this work was to recover water rights of farmers and well owners whose wells were no longer capable of pumping the required volumes of water. PARC also started a pilot project of rehabilitating irrigation network in the same town and another project to treat wastewater in the city of Bidya in the Nablus district. The wastewater treatment plant in Bidya was set to increase the volume of water available for agriculture. According to Thaeer Jalloud of PARC's Programs and Projects Department, the wastewater treatment plant in Bidya was built with basic and simple



◀ Hosni Nasser, owner of the water meter Qabatya well.

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An estimated 60 percent of the overall water consumption in the West Bank goes to agriculture and only 40 percent goes to households. The potential of wastewater treatment plants can go up to providing 50 percent of irrigation water. Nevertheless, a psychological problem is still there and needs to be addressed before such a nationwide project kicks off the ground. The people, explained Zimmo, are unreceptive to the idea of eating vegetables irrigated with treated wastewater. Therefore, they need an educational campaign to explain this issue. In the meantime, treated wastewater can be used to irrigate fodders plus

methods that rely more on natural substances, including rocks and sand, and that is why its outcome is restricted to fodders and orchard trees or to any not raw-eaten vegetables. As far as Bidya beneficiaries are concerned, they double scored. They reduced environmental and health problems through the treatment accorded to some 11.2 cubic meters of wastewater daily. They also increased the water available for restricted irrigation with some 4,000 cubic meters per year.

**No free water but improved capacities**

Salah Eddine Assaf is one of the farmers whose 14 dunums of land are next to the water reservoir that was built in Qabatya with EU aid. For him, however, the project meant almost nothing. "We expected the water cost to drop to minimal charges," he said of his expectations, adding that as far as he saw things, the well rehabilitation

Birzeit University campus



One of the projects of well rehabilitation in the Qabatya locality, district of Jenin.

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benefited only its owner. Salah Eddine must have thought that the rehabilitation of the well would automatically mean obtaining water free. His attitude, so it seems, shows that certain level of explanation is needed so that farmers like Salah Eddine understand the essence of foreign assistance.

Omar Damaj, an engineer who runs the project on behalf of PARC in Qabatya, said that some of the farmers tend to look at the half-empty glass instead of seeing the overall picture. "There is this well that could hardly provide the amount of water needed

for farmers. We received EU assistance to rehabilitate it, bringing its capacity from 25 up to 35 cubic meters per hour. Instead of looking at this side of the coin, some farmers prefer to look at the other side where they wrongly believed that donor assistance automatically meant receiving water for free." The other achievement of rehabilitating this well, said Omar, was decreasing the fuel consumption from 10 to 5 Euros per hour while increasing the area of land irrigated from 150 up to 230 dunums.

Indeed, 83 farmers benefit from this well. Hosni Nasser,

the well owner, explained that the minute the assistance came in and his well managed to increase its capacity, it no longer was his. "I wish my well could supply sufficient water volumes to all but every one knows this is impossible," he said. "The well's capacity, at the end of the day, remains limited and cannot cover all the needs." He too did not like the comments made by Salah Assaf. Water, he concluded, is scarce and we should do our best to benefit whomever we can. But we also expect cooperation and understanding from others." ■

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**Name:** MEDA WATER  
**Budget:** € 40 million (MEDA)  
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*This programme attempts to define the means to reinforce regional cooperation, to make proposals to rationalize planning and management of water resources, and to contribute to the creation of new water resources by means of reinforcing institutional capacities and training, exchange of information and know-how and transfer of know-how and technology.*

*MEDAWARE is one of the projects in the MEDAWATER Programme.*

**Website:** [www.medawater-rmsu.org](http://www.medawater-rmsu.org)



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**Contact:** EuroMed Info Centre,  
 Rue D'Egmont 15 1000  
 Brussels  
 Tel: +32 2 513 7125  
 Fax: +32 2 230 2513  
[www.euromedinfo.eu](http://www.euromedinfo.eu)