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## **The cart before the horse; why institutional development is a mandatory prerequisite to equity and sustainability**

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**EQUITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE WASH SERVICES:  
FUTURE CHALLENGES IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD**

**The cart before the horse: Why institutional development  
is a mandatory prerequisite to equity and sustainability**

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*Lebanon*

**REFERENCE NO. 3272**

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**Lebanon context**

Despite comparatively abundant water resources, Lebanon suffers from water stress and insecurity. Mismanagement of resources within a framework of institutional and policy fragmentation have led to consistent failure to provide adequate services and ensure sustainable revenue streams and natural resource regeneration. The result is breakdown of trust between users and utilities, rise of alternative, expensive, and often illegal and/or unregulated water sources and services (bottled water, water trucking, and private wells), and unimpeded depletion and pollution of watercourses and aquifers.

Regional Water Establishments (Public Utilities) have a legal monopoly over water service provision but are severely understaffed, under-skilled, undercapitalized, and overburdened by high energy intermittence, costs, and outstanding liabilities as well as arrears, overconsumption, and illegal use. They are semi-autonomous institutions but, due to conflicting laws, decrees, and policies, are unable to exercise that autonomy effectively. Due to the protracted, compounding, multifaceted, and mutually-reinforcing crises of the last decade, as well as the palpable impact of climate change, Water Establishments are at a breaking point, and the implications on the services they struggle to provide are grave.

**Sectoral response**

Water sector governance has progressed slowly in the last decade, and strategies and masterplans are now being undermined by the concurrent financial and political crises.

***National policies and practices***

Since 2000, when Law 221 concerning the organization of the Water Sector was promulgated, little legislative progress was made. In 2012, the Ministry of Energy and Water (MoEW) released its first National Water Sector Strategy, characterized by a supply-side bias and a focus on large-scale infrastructure (such as dams). Meanwhile, loan-funded public investment favoured the country's core over its periphery and did not always consider the mandated WEs' capacity to operate, maintain, and recover costs. Soon after, laws and decisions barred the Civil Service Board from recruiting permanent staff and prohibiting expansion of contractual / daily worker numbers in all public institutions.

A paradigm shift appeared to be happening with the adoption of the Law 77, the Water Code, in 2018 after lingering for over a decade. Although it was adopted in haste ahead of the CEDRE international conference and only adapted and (re)ratified in late 2020, it gave WEs some added powers and cleared up much of the legal contradiction. Within the same period, the MoEW developed a new National Water Sector Strategy which for the first time prioritized reforming governance and investing in institutions over infrastructure works. The present conditions, however, have made implementation of both the law and strategy virtually impossible.

### ***External assistance***

After the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon, international aid actors upscaled their programming in Lebanon with a focus on reconstruction, economic development, and democratization. With the onset of the war in Syria and influx of refugees, the focus quickly shifted to humanitarian assistance. A few years in, as the protracted nature of the crisis became clear and stabilization interventions supporting public institutions, local authorities, and host communities became imperative and mandatory, the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan was adopted and has until recently remained the main framework under which external assistance is provided to both refugee and host communities. More recently, two other agendas, CEDRE and 3RF, were also adopted, each more stringent in its demand for reform than the last.

The WaSH sector therein echoed the agendas of the Government of Lebanon and donors, focusing on reconstruction after 2006, then servicing refugee communities and their immediate hosts, with a special attention to Informal (Tented) Settlements, from 2013 onward. By abandoning resilience and succumbing to the Government of Lebanon's policy against joint solutions for all communities, most actors limited any development-type work to one-shot infrastructure interventions coupled with some generic awareness programming within the limitations of 'stabilization'. It is only in recent years that strategies and programs with transformative potential began to take center-stage.

### **WeWorld-GVC's response**

#### ***Three pillar program***

WeWorld-GVC's Water Governance Program in Lebanon has paralleled the evolution of the sector, albeit with a prefigurative tendency through its constant piloting of new approaches and adaptation. We were among the first to recognize the need for holistic, development-centred programming with a strong emphasis on user-utility mutual accountability. As such, we have piloted and refined a three-intervention pillar program of *Infrastructure Improvement, Capacity Building, and Community Engagement*. Thematically, we have focused on *Non-Revenue Water* as the intersection of all three pillars and a low-hanging fruit that promises good return on investment. Our experience is captured in approaches, manuals, and guidelines, especially with regards to community engagement and behavioral change, and has contributed to influencing the strategic direction of partners and donors alike.

Despite fairly high success rates on local service improvement, cost recovery, and trust building through continuous capacity building and maintained presence, there was a clear trend of regression soon after handover to the WEs, who are unable to effectively sustain results and manage conflicts as they arise. We were able to observe these trends through sustained presence in the same target communities since 2014 and well beyond infrastructure handover, working in close proximity with WE local teams and supporting their daily duties. Our presentation will focus on how we are meeting this challenge and, increasingly, delivering results that reverse this trend.

#### ***Establishment-led service improvement and cost recovery***

In recognition of the above and building iteratively on its tried-and-tested approaches, WeWorld-GVC has been transitioning to the *Establishment-Led Service Improvement and Cost Recovery* (ELSICR) Modality, which puts WEs at the centre. The bottleneck is undoubtedly institutional development and capacity, and we have shifted our approach to one where resources are routed by and through the WEs, in close collaboration with non-profit partners, in an effort to fill resource gaps, bolster resident capacity, and transform their image and improve their standing. A recently launched project brings us together with consortium partners to pilot this modality with all WEs, providing skilled staff secondment, coaching, equipment, materials, incentives, and guidance within a technical assistance framework targeting local offices/teams through a bottom-up approach.

### **References**

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## Contact details

The abstract was drafted by WeWorld-GVC's Jawad Taher, Water Advisor in Lebanon; Giorgio Cancelliere, WaSH Supervisor in Italy; and Elena Diato, Deputy Country Director for Programs in Lebanon. Along with partner organizations, former colleagues, and current field team members, the authors have been implementing the Water Governance Program for many years and assuming different roles.

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