The impact of the new refugee discourse on water governance in Lebanon and Jordan

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Discourse, a central concept

• “A shared way of apprehending the world” (Hajer, 1995)
• Discourses as shared, structured ways of speaking, thinking, interpreting, and representing things in the world
• The whole process of social interaction, which includes the text (final product) and the processes of text production and interpretation (in the latter the text is a resource)

• Importance of dominant discourses in shaping policies
How is the new discourse on refugees impact water governance in Lebanon and Jordan?

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- Desk review of newspaper articles, reports, press releases, strategies, plans, etc.
- Semi-structured interviews with key figures
Lebanon (1/2)

Context

- Lebanon hosts the **highest number of refugees** per capita worldwide

- Relatively water-rich country compared to regional average but several affecting factors (e.g. failing infrastructure, transboundary issues, poor management) and **water quality issues**

- Renewable water availability has dropped from more than 1,000 cubic meters a year per person to around 700m per person since the refugees arrived

New discourse

- From a ‘regional-blame model’ to a ‘domestic-blame model’:
  - Before the Syrian crisis, mainly blaming Israel a) transboundary water governance b) damage to infrastructure
  - Impact of the influx of Syrian refugees emphasizing both the quantity (depletion of resources) as well as on the quality of water resources (water contamination and salinization)

- In both cases, the water discourse by the Lebanese government aims at redirecting public attention from government mismanagement and inefficient policies to external causal factors
Manifestations of the discourse

• The mainstream dominant discourse has been registered in interviewees with academics from the American University of Beirut (AUB) and in public declarations of governmental officials.

• Discourse exploitation in the lead-up to 2018 parliamentary elections. E.g. “This [water] pollution has increased with the presence of the Syrian refugee camps in huge numbers on the banks of the river in west Bek’aa” (MP Mohammad Qabbani) – fueling rising tensions.

Government of Lebanon and population’s response

• “Lebanon Crisis Response Plan” including the delivery of humanitarian and stabilization interventions but largely unfunded.

• Most focus on humanitarian/short-term interventions through UN agencies.

• People resorted to informality (unlicensed wells, unsanitary water disposal) – which risk being a main cause of future vulnerability.
Jordan (1/2)

Context
• 650k refugees registered Vs 1.4 millions according to the government
• Said to be the second most water scarce country in the world
• Large scale investments (wells, pipelines, dams) bought Jordan time, but the impact of the Syria crisis seems to have sped up the clock – leading to growing popular dissatisfaction over declining quality and quantity of water

New discourse - two main governmental narratives on refugees inflow:

1) As a justification for weakened services and decreasing conditions of living
   • Water demand increased by average 20%
   • Refugee influx “ruined” ministry’s strategies and plans + scapegoating
   • Inefficient water habits of Syrians

= diverting popular anger away from government responsibility and mismanagement
2) As an opportunity to mobilize additional funding from the international community

- Jordan Response Plan, requesting US$ 1.2 billion in 4 years
- Continuous threat that underfunding would have consequences on people’s health and living conditions
- Balancing immediate needs with resilience building interventions

Recalibrating national strategies

- Justified by severe impact of Syrian refugees influx
- Bridging supply and demand by increasing supply, with focus on infrastructure construction and rehabilitation
- No emphasis on more unpopular policies to reduce demand (e.g. households and especially agriculture)
Comparative analysis

1. In both countries discourses blaming refugees to divert public dissatisfaction away from governmental responsibilities

2. Jordan registered more marked shift from endogenous to exogenous factors

3. In both countries discourses were geared towards mobilizing resources from international community (with slightly different purposes)

4. Jordan’s shift of national policies more marked, forward-looking and long-term oriented than Lebanon

5. Scope for further investigating relationship between discourse and real impact