



Addressing Challenges in Water & Environmental Governance:

The Role of Iraqi Youth in Fostering Accountability

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*Final Report of the Youth for Accountability in
Environmental Governance program*

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

<i>GoI</i>	<i>Government of Iraq</i>
<i>INDC</i>	<i>Intended Nationally Determined Contributions</i>
<i>IQD</i>	<i>Iraqi Dinar</i>
<i>KRG</i>	<i>Kurdistan Regional Government</i>
<i>MoA</i>	<i>Ministry of Agriculture</i>
<i>MoCHMPW</i>	<i>Ministry of Construction, Housing, Municipalities & Public Works</i>
<i>MoE</i>	<i>Ministry of Environment</i>
<i>MoP</i>	<i>Ministry of Planning</i>
<i>MoWR</i>	<i>Ministry of Water Resources</i>
<i>NDC</i>	<i>Nationally Determined Contributions</i>
<i>SWLRI</i>	<i>Strategy for Water and Land Resources in Iraq</i>
<i>YAEG</i>	<i>Youth for Accountability in Environmental Governance</i>

Introduction

Climate change will create new risks and increasingly test the resilience of countries across the Middle East region, and Iraq is no exception. Intensified droughts have already exacerbated water scarcity problems across the country. Iraq's water challenges, however, are not primarily due to climate change, at least not yet. Iraq's problems with water scarcity and water pollution are the product of two significant trends: first, upstream damming in Iran and Turkey has dramatically reduced water flows into Iraq in recent decades. Iraq has yet to negotiate a sustainable and long-term agreement with the upstream riparian states despite sending successive technical delegations to Ankara.¹ Second, weak environmental and water governance within Iraq, particularly over the past two decades, has led to disproportionately high losses of water and contamination across the overall system and exposed the country's antiquated water and environmental infrastructure.

Iraq's political system undoubtedly plays a role in constraining effective environmental governance. The apportionment of an already-complex government bureaucracy across the various ethno-sectarian groups and political blocs introduced following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the subsequent turmoil and insecurities that ensued afterwards, set the stage for a fragmented governance system largely incapable of addressing the country's complex environmental needs². Industrial polluters contaminating the country's water supply largely go unpunished, while large-scale construction projects dig wells outside state approved

limits³. Water pipe networks, drainage systems, and sewage treatment facilities are poorly maintained and often entirely inoperable⁴. The complexity and high price tag for environmental/water infrastructures have pushed them further down the priorities list of consecutive governments. The government of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani has emphasized the importance of environmental and water resources, and vowed to lower emissions and combat pollution, both of which are greatly needed. However, it remains to be seen whether these pronouncements will be realized both in policy and budgetary priorities⁵. Previous governments have made similar manifesto pledges but made little progress.

Can civil society and youth play a role in driving change in the environmental governance system? IRIS launched the Youth for Accountability in Environmental Governance program to answer that very question. Building upon the energy of the already emerging new generation of environmentally minded citizens, the pilot program brought together young leaders (ages 20 to 30) who are striving to hold the government of Iraq accountable and make a meaningful impact in preserving water resources, reducing water and environmental pollution, and improving environmental governance generally. Over the course of two in-person workshops, the program convened 20 young environmental leaders (from civil society, academia, and the civil service) from across 11 provinces of Iraq, together with senior expert trainers with current or previous high-level positions in government. The objective of the program was to strengthen the knowledge of emerging leaders about Iraq's complex environmental governance system, enabling them to

1 Shapland, G. "Water Security in Iraq." London School of Economics, May 2023. https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/119442/1/230501_WATER_SEC_IN_IRAQ_REPORT_non_sensitive_version.pdf

2 Skelton, M. "Competing Over the Tigris: The Politics of Water Governance in Iraq." Institute of Regional and International Studies, November 2022.

3 Zwijnenburg, W. "Troubled Waters: Documenting Pollution of Iraq's Shatt Al-Arab River." Bellingcat, November 2020. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2020/11/10/troubled-waters-documenting-pollution-of-iraqs-shatt-al-arab-river/>

4 Al-Rubaie, A., Mason, M. and Mehdi, Z. "Failing Flows: Water Management in Southern Iraq." LSE Middle East Centre, July 2021.

5 UN Affairs. "Iraqi Prime Minister highlights national priorities focused on people." UN News, September 2023. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/09/1141367>

navigate the inner workings of the relevant government departments, develop policy approaches, and identify gaps for grassroots evidence-based advocacy to promote and enhance accountability. Drawing on the discussions and deliberations in the two workshops, this report provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities, key insights and takeaways, and the prospects for new approaches towards accountability in environmental governance.

Part 1: Challenges facing environmental & water governance in Iraq

One major challenge facing youth environmental activists in their efforts to hold the government accountable is the sheer complexity of the governmental system with regards to water and the environment⁶. Water allocations and water pollution are regulated and managed by numerous Government of Iraq (GoI) authorities, including the Ministry of Water Resources (MoWR), the Ministry of Environment (MoE), the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA), the Ministry of Construction, Housing, Municipalities and Public Works (MoCHMPW), in addition to provincial authorities, legislative bodies, and corresponding Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) agencies. Each of these government bodies has distinct roles and financial constraints, and these elements must be understood before one can hold them accountable for their performance.

The focus on Iraq's complex environmental and water governance system (including both relevant GoI and KRG agencies) does not mean to minimize the importance of holding other key actors accountable, including domestic private sector companies, international organizations and militaries, and international oil companies; however, the Iraqi

government should receive the bulk of the attention given that ultimately the state is chiefly responsible for managing and regulating Iraq's environment, and fortunately youth environmental activists are already working with the government on a number of environmental issues in a variety of local contexts and national forums.

Main gaps in the environmental & water governance system

Poor coordination

Discussions at the YAEG workshop highlighted that the complexity of the interagency picture described above requires close coordination between different government bodies. Effective water management necessitates collaboration among various institutions involved in water governance. For example, decisions regarding water allocations in Iraq are primarily made by the MoWR, but the MoWR must consider crop needs (determined by the MoA), oil extraction demands for fresh water (Ministry of Oil), and drinking water requirements (MoCHMPW). However, relevant water management institutions at different levels of the government—federal, regional, and local—operate independently and are often reluctant to share data and cooperate on common objectives. This interagency incoherence is exacerbated by political incentives and dynamics⁷.

6 Hamasaeed, Sarhang, Skelton, Mac, and Zmkan Saleem. "Climate Adaption Key to Iraq's Stability and Economic Development." United States Institute of Peace, November 29, 2023. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/11/climate-adaption-key-iraqs-stability-and-economic-development>.

7 *ibid.*

Politics plays a role in skewing interagency cooperation. As a product of post-2003 political fragmentation, key positions in influential water governance ministries such as the MoWR and the MoA have been occupied by representatives of competing political factions and parties. This political discord manifests in water management when government officials aligned with different parties refuse to collaborate and coordinate policies. As one government participant noted, the outcome is detrimental to the water sector:



When ministries are occupied by followers of competing parties under the muhassasa system, coordination becomes unlikely, ultimately affecting the water sector.

Flagging infrastructures

The government's role in building and maintaining water infrastructures formed a major subject of discussion during the workshops. Addressing the pervasive problem of water contamination requires maintaining, expanding, and updating the country's water infrastructure, particularly water treatment facilities. However, institutional negligence and politically motivated fund allocations have undermined these efforts. Outdated and faulty wastewater treatment facilities continue to allow for the contamination of major rivers like the Tigris, with examples such as the direct dumping of wastewater from health facilities into the river due to malfunctioning facilities and lack of alternatives⁸. The deterioration of institutional norms exacerbates the neglect of water infrastructure. Ministries and institutions responsible for water management and regulation, including the MoCHMPW, MoE, and MoP, have failed to prioritize the maintenance of water infrastructure, particularly

water purification and sewage treatment facilities. The prevailing attitude among government officials towards this issue is troubling, with their focus primarily on crafting strategic documents and neglecting the urgent need for infrastructure improvements.

Weak enforcement

Political dynamics significantly impede enforcement efforts in water management, especially during periods of severe water scarcity, exacerbating the challenges faced by downstream provinces like Missan, Basra, and Dhi Qar. The reduced water levels in Iraq's Tigris and Euphrates rivers have led to heightened social tensions in these regions. As authorities address violations of water consumption upstream to ensure equitable water distribution, they encounter formidable obstacles rooted in political alliances and patronage networks. The influence of political support for violators severely hampers enforcement initiatives. Construction projects, farmers, and tribal leaders, buoyed by political backing, defiantly resist attempts to curb violations of water consumption and well-digging, thereby exacerbating water shortages downstream. This resistance is often bolstered by entrenched patronage systems, where influential figures exploit their political connections to evade accountability for their actions⁹. Such dynamics create a vicious cycle wherein marginalized individuals and communities bear the brunt of water scarcity, while powerful interests prioritize their own economic and political gains. Moreover, the politicization of water management further complicates enforcement efforts. Decision-making processes regarding water enforcement actions are often mired in political calculations rather than objective assessments of environmental sustainability and social equity. This politicization breeds distrust among stakeholders and undermines the legitimacy of regulatory measures, fostering a climate of impunity for violators. Consequently, the enforcement capacity

8 France 24. "Rampant water pollution threatens Iraq's shrinking rivers." February 21, 2024. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240221-rampant-water-pollution-threatens-iraq-s-shrinking-rivers>.

9 Saadoun, Mustafa. "Tribal disputes flare in southern Iraq over water scarcity." Al-Monitor, February 14, 2018. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/02/water-security-iraq-tribal-conflicts.html>.

of relevant authorities is undermined, exacerbating the already weak position of vulnerable communities¹⁰.

Financial constraints

The expansion of water infrastructure and the acquisition and maintenance of critical monitoring technologies and facilities are hindered by a lack of funding. YAEG participants lamented the scarcity of budgetary allocations across key ministries involved in water management, including the MoWR and the MoE. One participant expressed frustration, questioning the allocation of Iraq's sizable budget: "Anywhere you ask, they say we do not have budget." As a consequence of these budgetary constraints, the MoE's monitoring stations and laboratories are non-operational.

Efforts to rebuild these stations, installed by a foreign company in 2012 but defunct since 2017 due to maintenance issues, face constant financial hurdles. Approval delays from the MoP further exacerbate these challenges, hindering the MoE's attempts to restore functionality. Similarly, plans dating back to 2008 for the construction of wastewater treatment plants in Karbala have yet to receive approval, illustrating bureaucratic inefficiencies in allocating funds for critical infrastructure projects. Even when projects are approved, they often remain unimplemented due to insufficient funding allocations.

Overall, the allocation of substantial and necessary funds to water management institutions such as the MoE, MoWR, and MoA lacks priority among Iraq's major political factions. Despite the estimated expenses of essential strategies like the Strategy for Water and Land Resources in Iraq reaching 180 billion Iraqi Dinars (IQD), the annual budget for MoWR peaked at only 1 billion IQD in 2018. A government representative in the workshop highlighted the political obstacles preventing increased funding for MoWR, stating



There are serious political issues that prevent more budget for Ministry of Water Resources.

In sum, financial constraints and budgetary challenges severely impede efforts to improve water management in Iraq, hindering infrastructure development, technological advancements, and water quality monitoring initiatives. Addressing these challenges requires prioritizing water management in budgetary allocations and overcoming bureaucratic hurdles to ensure adequate funding for essential projects and operations.

Gaps in Transboundary Negotiations Capacity

The dysfunction described above not only hampers internal governance but also significantly impairs Iraq's capacity to negotiate effectively with its upstream neighbors. The Iraqi government has long grappled with securing a larger share of water from neighboring Turkey and Iran, where the country's major rivers originate. Over the past decade, Iraq's vital rivers, including the Tigris and Euphrates, have experienced unprecedentedly low water levels due to a combination of climate change, regional drought, and the damming practices of Iran and Turkey. These declining water levels lie at the core of Iraq's water scarcity crisis, exerting detrimental effects on socio-economic and political stability, particularly in the southern provinces.

10 Wilkinson, Jane. "A Vicious Circle: State-building, Climate Change Vulnerability and the Monopoly of Violence in Basra, Iraq." Princeton University, May 26, 2023. <https://jpia.princeton.edu/news/vicious-circle-state-building-climate-change-vulnerability-and-monopoly-violence-basra-iraq>.



Despite its efforts, Baghdad's attempts to succeed in water diplomacy have been hindered by a lack of coherent negotiation strategy. This failure is intricately linked to the internal fragmentation of water management within Iraq. One of the government representatives at the YAEG workshop highlighted the absence of a unified constituency in policy negotiations, mirroring the broader lack of coordination among government institutions responsible for water governance. Key ministries such as the MoWR and the MoE wield significant influence over the water sector but often make decisions independently. This imbalance is particularly evident in water negotiations with Turkey, where the MoWR assumes a disproportionately large role, detracting from its primary responsibility of addressing domestic water scarcity issues.

Moreover, the composition of Iraq's negotiating team with Turkey lacks the necessary qualifications and expertise, further undermining its effectiveness. Delegates are often selected based on political affiliation rather than competency, perpetuating a culture of patronage and political favoritism. The politicization of ministry appointments, driven by the muhassasa system, fosters instability within relevant ministries and hampers the accumulation of institutional knowledge and expertise. Furthermore, the frequent turnover of personnel within ministries, particularly after national elections, disrupts institutional continuity and exacerbates dysfunctionality. Instead of a stable transition, new ministers often replace a significant portion of existing employees with their own appointees, leading to chaos and inefficiency within the institution.

Part 2 – Towards Accountability in Environmental and Water governance

Youth and civil society actors advocating for greater accountability in tackling Iraq's water and environmental crises encounter numerous obstacles, including limited transparency, restricted access to information, insufficient legal safeguards, and a convoluted government bureaucracy. However, there is a pressing need for bottom-up accountability mechanisms to assess and oversee government performance in environmental and water governance. This section delves into potential new approaches to enhance accountability in environmental governance, as identified through discussions at the YAEG workshops.

Accountability in environmental strategy

YAEG participants and government officials emphasized the importance of pursuing enhanced accountability in Iraq's strategic planning processes. In recent years, the Iraqi government has not been successful in formulating environmental and water strategies that are aligned with financial and political realities. For example, the Strategy for Water and Land Resources in Iraq (SWLRI) that covered the period 2015-2035 was based on a large and fairly comprehensive database that encompassed different environmental sectors. Nonetheless, the investments it required were by far out of sync with what the government is capable or willing to commit, rendering the strategy ineffective.

For environmental governance to be inclusive of the needs of the current and future generations, youth and civil society actors must be included in the

formulation of environmental strategies and treated as stakeholders with the right to hold government agencies accountable. The YAEG workshops highlighted that youth and civil society are capable of contributing to these discussions and should be given the space and opportunity to participate. Comprehensive long-term strategies need to be put in place to secure the sustainability of water and land resources – and youth must play an important role in devising them. These strategies require extensive and accurate datasets and projections of various environmental parameters to assess scenarios and determine investment needs.

The government has committed itself to international climate change initiatives, which in theory should play a major role in shaping Iraq's environmental planning. The Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) is a commitment that the Iraqi government has declared in 2015 to mitigate emissions and adapt to the effects of climate change. While unbinding, the two documents associated with this commitment, namely the finalized NDC and the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC), set measurable objectives, albeit to a limited extent, and reflect the government's recognition of the significance of these objectives. Some of these objectives include expanding the capacity of water treatment facilities to 6.4 BCM/year, building more treatment units to recycle 2078 BCM/year of wastewater and allocating \$80 billion to that end, and allocating over \$45 billion for the transition to modern irrigation methods, all by 2035¹¹.

11 Ministry of Environment of Iraq. 2015. Iraq's Intended Nationally Determined Contributions. <https://moen.gov.iq/Por-tals/0/sixth/reports%20and%20studies/INDC%20Report.pdf>.

Accountability in environmental data collection and access

Pursuing accountability on these environmental strategies and commitments is complicated by numerous challenges. The SWLRI represents a key resource in tracking where the country stands in terms of water resources and infrastructure investment, yet it was never published. Data associated with water resources are guarded as state secrets on the dubious grounds that making such information public could impact water negotiations with upstream countries Turkey and Iran. Reservoir levels, water flow rates, and crop production can already be estimated by other countries using geographic information system and remote sensing technologies. Lack of access to data – including not only water quantity and quality but also information on progress towards the completion of key water infrastructures – prevents civil society from holding government departments accountable. Civil society activists who pursue this information without adequate legal protections often face intimidation.

The Right of Access to Information bill presented to the parliament in February 2024 specifically prohibits citizens from obtaining any information that “affects the negotiations with other countries.”¹² This does not only hinder accountability in strategic environmental planning, as water and agriculture could fall under this criterion, but could also be used to target civil society members who engage in tracking implementation and progress for evidence-based advocacy efforts. The Right of Access to Information bill should explicitly state the right of civil society in obtaining information related to environmental governance. An Iraqi environmental activist participating in the YAEG workshop stated:



Often, public anger emerges as a result of lack of data and information about pollution, the health impacts, and so on. The Right of Access to Information Law could ensure communication between the government and the public, enabling civil society to track progress on environmental governance.



12 Alsumaria.tv. “بعد القراءة الأولى.. السومرية تنشر نص مشروع قانون الحصول على المعلومة” February 14, 2024. <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/politics/481626/بعد-القراءة-الأولى-السومرية-تنشر-نص-مشروع-قانون-الحصول-على-المعلومة>

Youth and civil society actors can spearhead community efforts in data collection on water pollution and air quality for climate and environmental action. Access to data is essential for civil society's efforts to press the government towards prioritizing the most essential infrastructures. Grand projects such as the Basra Seawater Treatment could in theory make a real difference to Basra's water supply, but these highly ambitious projects should not distract from the government's responsibility to build and maintain the more basic and fundamental components of water infrastructure – i.e., the water grid and treatment plants. Youth-led accountability efforts must be organized around what is most essential – as determined by the available data – rather than what is most ambitious.

Accountability in the performance of government agencies

Success in implementing environmental strategies requires a serious commitment from the government in providing sectoral agencies with the adequate resources to carry out their responsibilities while also establishing robust mechanisms for interagency coordination. YAEG participants recognized the financial and technical constraints that limit government departments and agencies in fulfilling their responsibilities in environmental governance. The Iraqi government has so far failed in providing adequate resources to relevant departments to achieve their goals outlined in SWLRI, NDC, and other strategic plans. For example, the Ministry of Environment's budget peaked at 0.06% of the corresponding country's total budget during the last decade while MoWR, Ministry of Agriculture (MoA), and the Ministry of Construction, Housing, Municipalities and Public Works averaged 0.46%, 0.67% and 1.60% respectively. As a result of

inadequate financial resources, ministries lack the necessary equipment required to maintain facilities, and impeded them from expanding their operational capacities.

Further, the government is yet to set up robust mechanisms for interagency coordination for government departments to coordinate policy planning and implementation with one another. The government's approach has traditionally been forming committees that include different governmental agencies with the leadership of the relevant ministries. While this approach has worked in some narrow contexts such as emergency drought response, it has proven suboptimal for coordination on environmental policymaking and long-term projects. A participant in the YAEG workshop noted:



There is a lack of communication between different ministries and an understanding of their roles. The lack of communication between the sectoral ministries has resulted in the absence of a central environmental monitoring body.

Bottom-up accountability has the potential to play a major role in enhancing the performance of government agencies. Youth and civil society can initiate advocacy campaigns to keep budgetary allocations to sectoral ministries in tandem with environmental strategies. For instance, the INDC states that



Transition to modern irrigation will cost \$45.543 billion over the next twenty years.¹³

13 Ministry of Environment of Iraq. INDC.

Iraq should have allocated approximately IQD 29.82 trillion during the last 10 years to be on track, yet the overall budget for the MoA by 2022 did not exceed IQD 4.27 trillion. Youth and civil society can press for the prioritization of the environmental agenda in the list of government priorities.

Accountability in ecosystem management

Environmental accountability requires a proactive sense of long-term ecological awareness. Investments in infrastructure projects, factories, and oil facilities should have to meet environmental impact assessment standards to ensure that the use of environmental resources does not leave chronic impacts on their environs and populace. This crucial component of environmental management is completely absent from the ethos of the current governance system.

The results of poor ecological management can be devastating. Water experts in the YAEG workshop discussed the draining and eventual disappearance of Sawa Lake. In this case, the local government of Muthana province ignored farmers and investors arbitrarily digging an enormous number of illegal wells for private farms and factories, drawing from the lake's underground water table and completely draining the lake.¹⁴ Exploiting the lake's ecosystem was seen as "good business" by local government officials, farmers, and investors; however, locals are lamenting the loss of a natural landscape feature and an intrusion of invasive animals and insects. Had the ecosystem been given the appropriate consideration, the local government would have known that the short-term socioeconomic profit from these investments falls starkly short of the long-term repercussions.

In this context, bottom-up environmental accountability requires long-term ecological awareness among

youth and civil society. Civil society has proven conscious of this concept in certain cases. Plans to build the Makhool Dam was stopped partly as a result of civil society campaigns with the help of academia. The dam was anticipated to endanger at least 184 archeological sites and displace thousands of families, a potentially disastrous investment with a staggering \$3 billion price tag¹⁵. Iraqi youth can apply this practice to other developments and infrastructure projects by highlighting the long-term impact on the ecosystem and its associated consequences on livelihoods, health, and equality of vulnerable communities.



14 Samya Kullab. "Iraq's 'pearl of the south' Lake Sawa dry amid water crisis." Associated Press, June 13, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/climate-business-religion-lakes-droughts-c1bc62812c4da7b440cbb67adcc5e988>.

15 Abbas, Alice. "The Makhoul Dam and its Environmental, Cultural and Social Impact." Save The Tigris, June 2022. https://savethetigris.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/The_Makhoul_Dam_Report-2.pdf.

Conclusion

Iraq is grappling with severe environmental and water challenges, posing significant risks for the next generation. Understanding that their future is at stake, youth are increasingly leading climate action efforts, demanding accountability from policymakers. However, Iraq's political landscape, dominated by powerful blocs, impedes accountability, often prioritizing political gains over the public good. Despite some government willingness to engage with youth and civil society, grassroots efforts in advocating for better environmental governance remain inadequately protected. Restrictions on data access, lack of transparency in project completion, and suppression of dissent constrain youth engagement in accountability efforts.

Yet, opportunities exist for progress. Closing the knowledge gap on interagency government dynamics (i.e., the roles and responsibilities of different water & environmental government agencies) can empower young activists to engage stakeholders effectively. By leveraging legal, political, and data-driven tools, youth can exert pressure on responsible government entities. Encouragingly, certain government stakeholders have begun embracing bottom-up accountability measures. For instance, the Parliament's Committee of Agriculture, Water, and Marshes has initiated open hearings on water management, potentially leading to the removal of incompetent officials. With civil society's support, these efforts can drive meaningful change. Fostering greater transparency and engagement between youth, civil society, and government is essential to address Iraq's environmental challenges effectively. By harnessing grassroots initiatives and holding government agencies accountable, Iraqi youth can lead the way in enhancing government responses to environmental degradation and climate change.



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