Countries in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) face similar challenges in achieving adequate land and water governance, food security and inclusive agricultural development. Although fragile systems are a result of many competing factors, water scarcity and land degradation are among the more serious risks that threaten sustainable development in the region. Population growth, climate change and conflict in the region comprise leading issues that contribute to the fragile environment. Efforts to strengthen land and water governance are fundamental to improve resilience.

The World Economic Forum 2015 Global Risks Report, rates water crises as the highest risk in NENA – a risk the region is not prepared to counter. Water scarcity is already common and current predictions point to further deterioration. Excessive groundwater extraction in the absence of regulations has critically contributed to depletion of water resources. This could exacerbate fragility as 70 percent of the region's poor live in rural areas and are mainly reliant on agriculture for their livelihoods. Efforts to expand agriculture, with no adequate land governance, has caused further harm and exacerbated water erosion and soil degradation. In addition, extreme climate conditions, overgrazing, inappropriate cropping patterns and salt concentration have transformed large areas of land into unproductive areas.

**Principles of good land governance**

Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security were endorsed by the Committee on World Food Security on 11 May 2012. Commendably the guidelines articulate general principles as well as those specific to implementation. In line with the complex issues that affect the NENA region, the guidelines stress that tenure problems should be resolved so they do not lead to conflicts. When conflicts arise, States and others should try to protect tenure rights and related records. When conflicts cease, States should ensure that the restitution and resettlement programmes support lasting solutions.
In the context of fragile systems, such as those in the NENA region, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can offer a plan of action to tackling fragility through improved land and water governance. In relation to land and water governance, there is a crucial nexus to consider between SDG 2 (food), SDG 6 (water) and SDG 15 (land) which represent the land, water and food nexus. The SDGs can facilitate the recovery process in fragile contexts by helping to re-establish basic services and they should be part of long-term solutions to improve land and water governance in the region.

When it comes to implementing effective land and water governance, there is no “one-size fits all” approach. Land and water governance principles and frameworks will need to be adapted to regional contexts, including those which accompany fragile systems.

Most of the NENA countries have enhanced their legal and policy frameworks over the years to include provisions and goals such as decentralization, basin-wide management planning, better coordination of decision-making, and multi-stakeholder participation. Nonetheless, one common theme that permeates throughout the region is translating these governance frameworks to effective implementation. Inter-sectoral cooperation is essential in this regard. As no one policy can sufficiently address the complexities of sustainable land and water management, coordination is necessary among a multitude of sectors so that they work together for robust practical frameworks that are compatible and can be effectively implemented.

To tackle the complexity of the NENA region, it will require institutional reform to improve land and water governance. Principles of good governance help to reduce instances of conflict concerning natural resources. Good land and water governance with a comprehensive approach can help to reduce escalation of conflicts and contribute to broader objectives of economic growth and poverty reduction. Reform should address efficiency and accountability, strengthen regulations, adopt participatory approaches and improve investment planning processes. There is a need for effective and transparent institutions, which can develop inter-sectoral water allocation and that are able to account for the distributional impacts that allocations have on various socioeconomic groups.

It is necessary to understand that the law and policy frameworks of land and water governance are part of a living cycle. Challenges of implementation and undesired policy effects should be fed back to policymakers to continue to adapt frameworks as necessary to meet the ever-changing landscape that issues of climate change, environmental degradation, and impacts of fragility generate. Not only are effective governance frameworks (and their implementing) vital for sustainable development, but they also support strengthened environments that aid in the promotion of conflict resolution.

The relationship between governance, water governance, water tenure governance and water tenure

Governance: formal and informal rules, organizations, and processes through which public and private actors articulate their interests; frame and prioritize issues; and make, implement, monitor and enforce decisions

Water governance: governance of water resources (in the broad sense, including global and cross-national water issues)

Governance of water tenure: governance concerning water tenure

Water tenure: the relationship, whether legally or customarily defined, between people, as individuals or groups, with respect to water resources

Governance challenges include, inter alia:
- Competing interests between sectors.
- Limited resources for implementation of laws and policies.
- Inter-sectoral policy coherence, cooperation, and managing trade-offs.

Groundwater Governance: A Global Framework for Action

The Groundwater Governance: A Global Framework for Action initiative was launched in 2011 to raise political awareness and to seek urgent action. These efforts culminated in delivering a Framework for Action to achieve effective water governance and sustainable development globally. The coalition of international organizations championed the need for a dedicated global framework to address over-exploited aquifers and put in place suitable management frameworks to improve their sustainable use.