



Lifting the veil: Unpacking the discourse of water scarcity in Jordan

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the construction of the discourse of water scarcity in Jordan. It identifies the actors constructing the discourse and the elements comprising the discourse. The study is important and makes an original contribution because while the issue of water scarcity in Jordan has been widely researched, it has been done mainly with engineering approaches, the discourse of water scarcity has been taken for granted, and studies on an in depth discursive analysis of the issue of water scarcity in Jordan are still missing. The study finds that there is a single dominant discourse of water scarcity, which is composed of two narratives: water insufficiency and water mismanagement. The water insufficiency narrative is constructed to emphasise factors external to the responsibility of the Jordanian government as reasons for water scarcity, like nature, refugees, and neighbouring countries. It is mainly constructed by governmental oriented actors and deployed to open solutions on the supply and conservation sides and ultimately to maintain the status quo of the current water uses. The water mismanagement narrative is constructed to emphasise as reasons for water scarcity factors of mismanagement of water resources, and deployed to increase economic efficiency in the water sector.

1. Introduction: mapping the discourse

To solve an issue, we first need to be clear about what the problem we are trying to solve is. Consequently, in order to respond to water scarcity and to manage the water governance at the local, national, and transboundary level, it is necessary to understand the reasons behind water scarcity. This would allow building sustainable, efficient, and effective capacity for integrated water management able to create new opportunities for cooperation, community and peace building, and conflict management.

As shown by Feitelson (2002), Mehta (2001), Alatout (2008), Selby (2003), and Edwards (2013), discourses of water scarcity are key to shape people's understanding of the issue - the causes behind water scarcity - and therefore how to solve it, meaning the policies in the water sector. Given the importance of the discourse of water scarcity, it is necessary to examine who constructs the discourse and how, revealing in this way their interests, and the policy solutions their discourse of water scarcity opens (or closes). Thus, an interdisciplinary approach is key to understanding the discourse of water scarcity and proposed policy approaches, and why certain policies are strongly supported while others are not.

In Jordan, water has been extensively studied by engineers, while little research has adopted a discourse analysis approach to water

scarcity in the country. Hussein (2017b, 2018a) showed how the discourse of water scarcity is constructed in the Jordanian educational system and the role of the discourse in shaping transboundary water governance; Bonn (2013) discussed the role of the donors' community in the Jordanian water politics; Yorke (2016) investigated the role of the shadow state in the Jordanian water sector. This article contributes to the literature on water scarcity in Jordan by providing an in-depth analysis on the discourse of water scarcity in Jordan, providing insights on the different causes of water scarcity in the country. This is important as it will allow policy makers and the donors community to better understand the nuances of reasons behind the issue of water scarcity, providing them with the tools to better design sustainable and inclusive policies to solve the issue of water scarcity. This is an important novel contribution because previous studies on water resources in Jordan did not explore the construction of the discourse of water scarcity and did not adopt a discourse analysis approach to the topic.

This article deploys elements of the theories on environmental discourse analysis. Environmental discourse theory (Hajer, 1995, The politics of environmental discourse : ecological modernization and the policy process) (Hajer, 1995; Dryzek, 1997) emphasizes the importance of discourses in policy making. Discourses play a central role in shaping environmental policy-making as they legitimise and back certain solutions and discredit and silence others (Leach & Mearns, 1996). The

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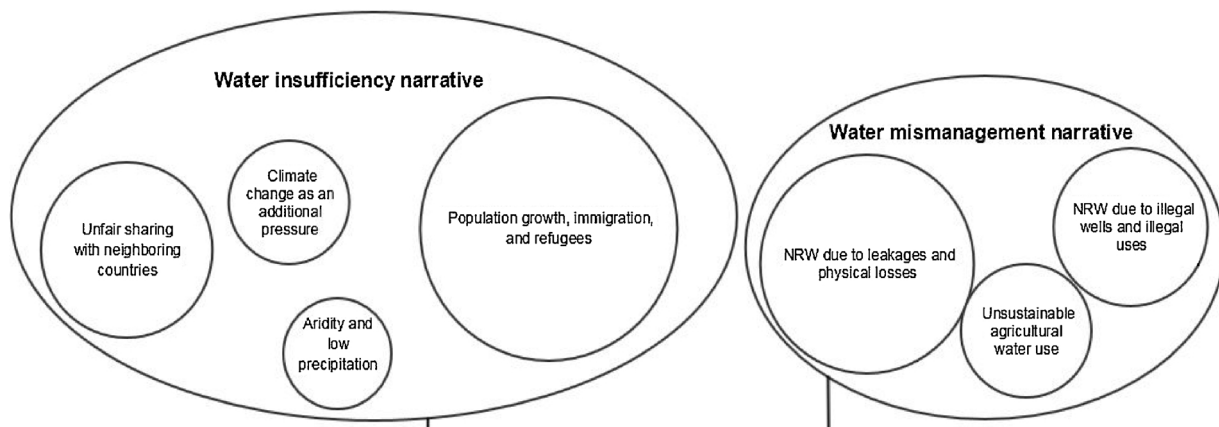


Fig. 1. Narratives and their relationship to related discourses.

peculiarity of environmental discourse theory is its direct link between discourses and environmental policy. Policy makers make sense of the complexity of environmental issues through discourses in order to suggest and identify potential solutions to certain issues (Dryzek, 1997: 9–10). For Dryzek (1997), a discourse is “a shared way of apprehending the world; embedded in language it enables those who subscribe to it to interpret bits of information and put them together into coherent stories or accounts,” thus legitimising knowledge and justifying environmental policies (Dryzek, 1997: 8).

This article is guided by the following research question: *What are the elements comprising the discourse of water scarcity, including narratives and sub-narratives?* After conducting the analysis of the interviews, focus groups, and documents collected during fieldwork, the discourse of water scarcity in Jordan emerged as being comprised by two narratives: water insufficiency and water mismanagement. The analysis showed seven subtypes of rationale within the two categories. Hence, for analytical purposes, as shown in Fig. 1,¹ this article maps the discourse into two narratives and seven sub-narratives:

- Population growth, immigration, and refugees
- Unfair sharing with neighbouring countries
- Climate change as an additional pressure
- Jordan as an arid and semi-arid region with low precipitation
- Non-Revenue Water: leakages and physical losses
- Non-Revenue Water: illegal wells and illegal uses
- The unsustainable agricultural water use

Nevertheless, it understands the discourse as fluid and not divided into different parts.² This choice is done, as it is believed that it is necessary to first clearly show how the problem is understood, in order to discern the interests and how the discourses relate to the proposed solutions.

To unpack the water scarcity discourse, after a methodological explanation, this article analyses the sub-narratives of the water insufficiency narrative, identifying which sub-narratives relate to which narrative. Then, it examines those comprising the water mismanagement narrative.

¹ The size of an oval indicates the dominance of the narrative in comparison to the other oval. The size of a circle inside the ovals indicate the dominance of the sub-narrative in comparison to the other circles in the same oval.

² In fact, the discourse could have been analysed also in other ways, dividing it for analytical purposes not into sub-narratives, but according to other categories to show and highlight other aspects, according to the needs of the analysis. Another way of mapping the discourse is according to the actors constructing them: governmental water insufficiency narrative; and donors and international organisations water mismanagement narrative. Another way of mapping the discourse would be to look at the solutions the narratives suggest.

2. Methodology

Data utilised in this article have been collected during fieldwork that took place over ten months in Amman, Jordan, between 2014 and 2015. This research made use of qualitative methods of data collection, with interviews as the main method of inquiry.³ The methods of data collection deployed are: document collection, semi-structured interviews, and focus-groups.

- Document collection: texts can produce, reproduce, or contribute to transform a discourse. Hence, key texts, reports, and policies, are central to identify and unpack the discourse of water scarcity in Jordan. Also autobiographies of key figures, former ministers' biographies, academic articles, national policies and strategies, governmental/donors/non-governmental organisations (NGOs) reports and briefings are all key texts that contributes in investigating the discourse of water scarcity. These documentations help in understanding how the water scarcity discourse is constructed, reproduced, and cemented.
- Semi-structured interview: this method was extensively employed, as it allows collection of data relevant to understand the interests, the power struggle, and hidden stories within and around the discourse. 106 semi-structured interviews were conducted. This method was used to interview policy-makers and actors involved in constructing or deploying the water scarcity discourse. This kind of interview made it easier to uncover the background stories often hidden to the public, to collect data about on-going negotiations. As water is a high political issue, there are not many available written sources on the Jordanian-Syrian and on the Jordanian-Israeli Joint Water Committees activities or on the current hydro-political relations. This method also allows collecting data to investigate the reasoning behind specific wording in reports and declarations.
- Focus-groups: this method was employed at the beginning of the fieldwork in order to gauge the general discourses around water scarcity in specific groups, such as farmers, Bedouins, and youth. It

³ In order to answer the guiding question, it is firstly needed to clarify my understanding of reality, which is that it cannot be captured objectively and neutrally (Julien, 2012: 45-46). While a material objective reality exists, our understanding of it is mediated, mainly through discourses. For instance, hydrological data provide us with information that need to be made sense of, understood, and interpreted. Hence, knowledge is not objective (Murphy, 1997: 5), but as Von Glasersfeld puts it, “it is made up of the network of things and relationships that we rely on in our living, and on which, we believe, others rely on, too” (Von Glasersfeld, 1995: 7). For Kincheloe, “there is no truly objective way of seeing things” (Kincheloe, 2005: 8). To unpack the different perspectives about water scarcity in Jordan, therefore, I opted for a combination of different methods.

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