

THE WATER FORUM IN TUNISIA'S AGRARIAN HEARTLAND

– A PIONEERING STEP IN SECURING THE REGION'S FUTURE

Water scarcity is a global problem and a reality that assumes a different dimension in your life when your tap water reduces suddenly to a trickle, while temperatures outside climb to records of 50°C and your very livelihood – crops and vegetables – are wilting away. This is exactly what has happened in the region of Kairouan, in the central part of Tunisia where agriculture is the dominant source of income. Unfortunately, **mismangement and overexploitation of the existing water resources have led to a severely strained situation.**

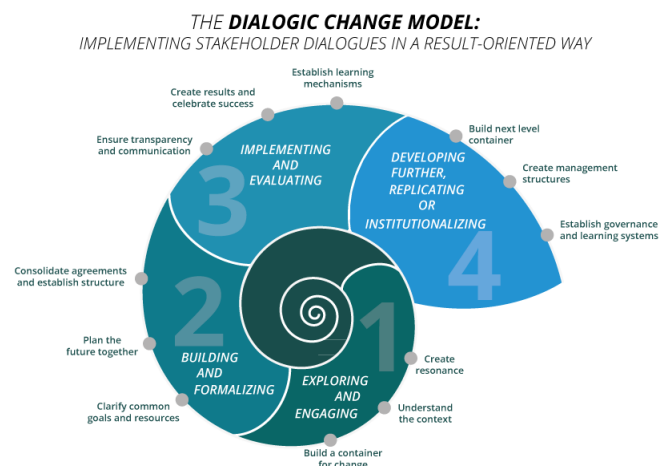
For one and a half years, the Collective Leadership Institute has been supporting the project AGIRE (*Appui à la Gestion Intégrée des Ressources en Eau*) realised by the German Development Cooperation (GIZ) in Kairouan to establish a dialogue between all stakeholders affected by this situation. The aim was to support the establishment of **a Water Forum with them, an enduring dialogue structure that would allow the diverse stakeholders to develop a more sustainable and integrated) water management approach for the region together.**

In post-revolution Tunisia, this is no easy feat. In the wake of the Arab Spring, the government and its administration are eager to promote more participatory governance processes, and increase its transparency – both for symbolic reasons and to follow up on its promise of new and more democratic political processes. But as with any transition from authoritarianism to greater democracy, this requires time and support for both the administration and the citizens. **And while the administration is, on paper, committed to this transition, a deep fear of losing power and unease often dominate.** The citizens, on the other hand, have to overcome decades of mistrust of public institutions. In this context, the idea of bringing them together to find solutions to a common good problem like water

management is fraught with complexities, challenges and paradoxes on more than one level.

Following our Dialogic Change Model (DCM), the CLI started by adapting the hallmarks of its first Phase, *Exploring and Engaging*, to understanding the context, creating resonance for change and carefully identifying and convening core groups of change agents (the container). The main stakeholders were identified as the **administration responsible for the resource management** – the Ministry of Agriculture with its national, regional and local branches – **and the water users in the pilot region of Sbikha in the province of Kairouan.** In line with the livelihoods in this part of Tunisia, the water users were exclusively farmers.

Unfortunately, neither the private sector nor the non-



governmental sector was prominent enough to play a significant role in the envisioned dialogue process. However, the engagement of the water users posed particular challenges. They were a diverse group depending on their locality, the size of their farm land, the products cultivated, their water source and access to that water source. In addition, the group was geographically dispersed across Sbikha and not organised, representing widely differing views on the problem, potential solutions and ways to realise them.



Consequently, our support had to focus strongly on the first phase of the DCM, Exploring and Engaging, including preparation of the administration and water users for dialogue (where diligent attention had to be paid to the water users to support their organisation) and dialogues within each stakeholder group (transversal dialogue) before both could come together to build trust and engage in a constructive mixed dialogue on better water management. Within these different steps, due attention was paid to a good balance of understanding the context, creating resonance and building key containers for change. The **special focus on a preparatory phase provided the necessary space to be present to and deeply listen to the diversity of the water users**, before supporting them to come together in a more structured way.

When we first met the water users, they did share one position: they felt they did not need to act, as the



problems came mainly from a failure of the government to provide enough water. The government, on the other hand, maintained that the water users had simply to abide by the law, instead of drilling illegal wells and depleting the groundwater resources beyond the stipulated annual quota. Six months later, the **water users saw the need to change their behaviour and become engaged both collectively and individually, and were prepared to enter into talks with the administration**, having realised that transparent dialogue and collaboration was the only way to achieve a lasting solution to the water crisis. With diligent

attention to understanding context and creating resonance among this stakeholder group, a clear and sustainable change in attitude began to take place.

CLI directly engaged some 400 farmers in the pilot district and supported the organization of 100 of them into a network of water users. Out of this network a further 40 were nominated to represent the group in talks with the administration. This new level of organisation among the water users helped empower them to communicate more effectively with one another, develop their positions on key issues and engage with the administration. This organisation and empowerment proved to be the decisive factor for success in the project. It was via their engagement and their propositions that the administration was drawn into the process, and realised the need to change their own attitudes on collaboration with the water users. **Empowerment of a marginalized stakeholder group through the Dialogic Change Model** not only succeeded in ensuring the valuable and morally imperative participation of farmers in relevant dialogue processes and structures, **it also allowed for their constructive contributions in the search for sustainable solutions**, a necessary factor for success.

'This CLI training has managed to break down the barriers between administration and water users.'

'We thought that the water was imperishable and always available. With this dialogue, we have understood that we are in danger of losing our access to water.'

At the same time however, this unprecedented level of organisation among the water users triggered fears of power loss among the administration and initially made them opposed to formally entering into dialogue.

This was resolved by a carefully designed capacity training in the dialogic approach, with representatives from both administration and water users as participants. **With our approach and strategic exercises from the DCM's methodological core, the hurdles of distrust and fear were overcome.**



At the first formal Water Forum in Sbikha in May 2016, the results of these successful talks were presented to 300 participants from all stakeholder groups and to the broader public:

- **Measures for more integrated water management**, both in the **short and medium term were presented**. These included the reduction of irrigated water areas; a commitment to crops that are low in water consumption; and financial incentives for farmers who use water saving irrigation techniques.
- **The Water Forum Coordination Committee**, a structure for sustainable and continued dialogue, was formally announced. Made up of representatives from both parties, this committee was mandated by the Forum to monitor the implementation of agreed upon water management measures.
- **A Water Charter** with guiding principles for all further activity was **publicly signed** by representatives from both parties and thus **constitutes a moral contract** for administration and water users to continue along their collaborative path together for a better and sustainable water management in the region.



The application of CLI's Dialogic Change Model brought two groups of people together whose mutual distrust made a constructive exchange around a common table initially seem impossible. It also supported both groups in co-developing and **committing to a local governance structure of an extent hitherto unheard of in Tunisia**. The water user and administration representatives have become a thriving team of change agents, a container that has helped to turn a once dysfunctional and fragmented system of water management into a vital and viable vision for a better, sustainable future in Tunisia's heartland.