



Image by Paul Cochrane

## **We Made Every Living Thing From Water: An Interview with Karim Eid-Sabbagh**

[Kieran Garrard](#)

Since the garbage crisis began in Lebanon in 2015, the country's environmental credentials have been repeatedly called into question by the international community and its own citizens. The ecological crisis exacerbated, and was exacerbated by, problems of water resource management. The sorry state of water infrastructure is at the root of Lebanon being among the world's top-fifteen per-capita consumers of bottled water. This plastic can be found everywhere, literally covering beaches, degrading in open dumps across the country, and burning with other garbage as seepage and toxins intensify pollution. Breaking out of this cycle of consumption, pollution, and exploitation will require a restructuring of socio-natural metabolic relations. This is as urgent as it is inescapable if Lebanon is to move toward a more sustainable future in terms of the environment and health.

The Europe and the World Center at the University of Liverpool recently screened Karim Eid-Sabbagh's *We Made Every Living Thing from Water*. The documentary, co-directed with Paul Cochrane, is an adaptation of Eid-Sabbagh's 2015 doctoral thesis in the Development Studies Department at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS): "A Political Economy of Water in Lebanon: Water Resource Management, Infrastructure Production, and the International Development Complex." Below is an edited transcript of a conversation with Eid-Sabbagh during his visit to the University of Liverpool.

**Kieran Garrard (KG):** Good afternoon Dr. Eid-Sabbagh, and thanks for speaking with me. So, what was your PhD thesis about?

**Karim Eid-Sabbagh (KES):** In short, my PhD looked at the intersection of what I call the international development complex—the network of international development actors and discourses—and the Lebanese water administration. I am particularly interested in how that interaction produces a specific form of water resource management, both ideologically and materially. Ideologically, it is a market-oriented supply-side approach that aims to create the highest financial return on any water use. This approach maximizes water production to maximize profits. Consequently, policies of large investments and major infrastructure, such as dams, are favored. This, in turn, allows the distribution of state funding to politically connected companies.



*[Beach close to Costa Brava dump covered in plastic bottles (March 2017). Image by Paul Cochrane.]*

**KG:** You recently developed your findings into a documentary—*We Made Every Living Thing From Water*—to help disseminate your research. What were the main challenges in adapting a PhD thesis into a documentary?

**KES:** The biggest challenge was that of making it accessible. The documentary is aimed at a Lebanese audience, as an educational tool and an awareness-raising project, addressing a fairly wide audience. So I think the biggest challenge was to take something that is fairly nuanced and has a lot of information and transmit as much as possible in a constructive way to a lay audience, while taking the audience seriously. We did not want to simplify it to the point where it becomes meaningless, but rather keep enough detail to get across the key points.

There was also the challenge of transforming a largely textual project (i.e., the thesis) into an audio-visual project (i.e., a documentary film). Scenes of pollution can be relatively easy to include, such as when rivers are overrun with trash. Other aspects were much more challenging to illustrate visually, at least for us first-time filmmakers. We relied on a rather straight forward narrative structure. There was also the issue of accessing sites. We secured permission from General Security in Beirut. But some of the team members would have needed permission from Military Intelligence to go to certain places south of the Litani River, and we never got a response from the media office of Hizballah. So we decided against going too far south. We nevertheless managed to show how the question of water is a problem that concerns every corner of the country. In some cases, our cameraman just barely evaded certain forms of harassment. Filming in and around trash for such a prolonged amount of time also resulted in our cameraman falling ill for a few days.

**KG: The thesis was completed before the 2015 garbage crisis and subsequent protests. Including this in the documentary meant some divergence from the thesis, with more emphasis placed on the pollutants and the social movement. This perhaps moved the documentary away from being merely a dissemination of the thesis and more toward a piece of journalism in its own right. What motivated this decision?**

**KES:** Since the trash crisis had just happened, and there were on-going protests when we started filming, there was not even much of a discussion about whether we would address some of the issues that came out of the crisis. As someone who has worked in political ecology for some time, it was clear that waste management—and therefore the trash crisis—was politicized. So we thought a narrative that highlights the politics of environmental resource management would be a good contribution to the larger discussion. Water offered a particularly illustrative entry point to do so, and the doctoral research made the choice all the more sensical.

**KG: One thing conspicuous by its absence from the documentary is a defense of water and waste management policy from the Lebanese government. Did you approach the administration for a comment?**

**KES:** We did. But having talked to many administration officials during the research for my thesis, I knew we would not get anything useful on tape, or anything quotable, because the only time people talked to me in earnest was off the record, and even then very rarely. What they would produce is your standard market environmentalist discourse: that the market is the only alternative and Lebanon has so much debt that it has to be the users that pay. The government has enough outlets in that discussion. Their discourse dominates. It is completely hegemonic on this issue, and so we decided very consciously to bring out the other voices. We had to try to find a balance between experts and people living the crisis and experiencing it, so we tried to include as much as possible other voices that are not usually heard, to show that maybe one needs to think about alternatives.





*[A truck and workers dumping waste into the Abu Ali river in Tripoli (April 2016). Image by Paul Cochrane.]*

**KG:** The fiscal problems of the state—including public debt above 150 percent of GDP—have led many to present privatization as the only solution. Would you support further government borrowing to invest directly in water infrastructure projects?

**KES:** It is a difficult question. The film talks about it very briefly, but if one looks at it historically, the post-war development scheme did envision Lebanon as being this banking hub. Therefore, early on, money was borrowed from local banks at tremendous interest rates. Two-year Treasury bonds at some point were earning an interest rate of thirty-eight percent if I am not mistaken. That brought a lot of capital to the bank: in the hundreds of percent growth in the first couple of years. A lot of this debt should be considered odious. It is basically banks and the capitalist class ripping off, through the state, the general citizenry. In that context, it becomes very difficult to say how to manage that debt. A lot of projects are being implemented in a way that provides very little benefit to the people, especially if one compares it to the cost. So I think there should be, and is, room for the government to invest in infrastructure and do so properly. However, it would require a whole different approach to public finances and economic policy: one that taxes more progressively to start with. At the current moment, the capitalist elite have captured the administration so thoroughly that this is far from happening.

**KG:** Is it fair to say there was no consideration or discussion either within the Lebanese administration or from any of the international actors involved of water being developed as a nationalized industry?

**KES:** None. Definitely not. In the post-civil war era, the discussions have focused on how much could be privatized. Most water services were run by some twenty local water offices,

supposedly under the purview of the ministry—but individual municipalities were also running services. As one can imagine, the civil war required communities to be creative in how they managed water and water service provision was very uneven across the country. Bad water quality and intermittent or absent public supply characterized most areas. After the war, the general push by relevant state institutional actors and the international aid machine has been for privatization—spearheaded by the World Bank. A lot of pressure was applied, and there was some resistance in parliament—some of it principled and other opportunistic. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, water office workers across the country often struck in opposition to the proposed reforms and out of fear for their jobs. The reform of water administration in 2000 did not end up privatizing the water sector in its totality, even if it that was the intention. This was a function of the state of infrastructure and the existing legal framework. Legal uncertainty and massive capital investment requirements meant that only Beirut and Mount Lebanon offered potential profits at the scale those leading the reforms were interested in. Nevertheless, the sector has been privatized through what we can call backdoor means. A number of functions, such as accounting, bill collection, and wastewater treatment plant operations, etc, of the newly created regional water establishments were outsourced to private contracting companies under the guidance of international development agencies. The French AFD and US AID are important drivers of these efforts.

**KG: It is clear that the prevailing view of water is as an instrumental good, deemed important because of its necessity for economic growth and productivity. Is there a need for reconceptualization of water, and the environment more generally, as an intrinsic good? And, is such a reconceptualization realistic in the short term either in Lebanon or among the international development complex?**

The extent of the environmental crisis is tremendous.

**KES:** I think that it is highly unlikely in the short term that policymakers and that the international development complex will actually adopt a different approach to water. There are a number of interrelated reasons for this. First is the overall normative preference for core capitalist investment and value extraction. Suez Environment and Veolia are two transnational corporations that have played a role in Lebanon, and incidentally, both have French origins. They generate profit through infrastructure construction or service management. Second, there is a myriad of actors, including development agencies, NGOs, and policy networks, that propagate discourses centered on markets, profitability, efficiency, and scarcity. “Integrated Water Resource Management” and the “Energy Food and Water Nexus” are the headings under which this is being peddled. All of this comes with loans and grants for infrastructure, technical and administrative support, consultancy contracts, and access to various promotions and jobs in the non-profit sector, the private sector, and the development sector. Third, the ideological differences between old guard water officials that started their employment prior to the civil war and the newer generation are striking. One should add here that this is also related to the nature of university training, especially in engineering and water-related fields of study. Most young graduates do not recognise the degree to which they are depoliticised and made to uncritically regurgitated these market environmentalist discourses. There is very little training in terms of critical social sciences. A fourth factor is the clientelistic networks of the Lebanese political economy: the ability of political elites to direct funds to clients and political allies that depend on public spending and development investment. These are some of the more important ideological, structural, and material incentives that work against the emergence and development of alternative discourses and practices in Lebanon.

However, I would argue that it is of the utmost importance that change happens sooner rather than later. The extent of the environmental crisis is tremendous. One should not paint too bleak a picture, as there is an increasing politicization and mobilization around progressive ideas. I think it is very important to remember and support this.



*[Litani river bridge with turtles caught in a tire (July 2016). Image by Paul Cochrane.]*

**KG: The documentary contains criticism of privatization of the water supply, as well as criticism of the lack of regulation concerning the drilling of private wells. Is there a pragmatic alternative to well-drilling or the purchase of bottled water for those who are not yet connected to national infrastructure?**

KES: No, there is not. Realistically at the moment if you can get bottled water, you should and will. Simply because that is the cleanest water that you can get. There are very few accessible studies on what kind of heavy metals or potentially carcinogenic or bacterial contaminants are actually in water from the network. Nor were there correlations that relate water pollution to public health, though it is very likely that the high cancer rates in Lebanon are related to the massive pollution.

**KG: Many of the international development actors are focused on coastal areas due to concern with pollution in the Mediterranean, and there is less concern with inland sources of pollution. Has this led to socially unjust outcomes?**

KES: Yes and no. On the one hand, the largest part of the population is on the coast, and initially, international actors with regard to wastewater treatment were focusing mostly along the Mediterranean. However, all the projects that were done in terms of waste-water treatment plants were highly inefficient because the ones that operate, operate only pre-treatment. So it is just taking out the chunky trash but not much more. A lot of these waste treatment plants



did not work for decades. They were constructed for a lot of money and then never actually connected to the network. Or when they were connected to the network, not enough waste-water was coming to the plant for it to actually operate. So a lot of waste-water was just put into the sea directly. In recent years there has been more effort to expand waste-water treatment infrastructure inland. The Beqaa Valley, for instance, now has two small operating treatment plants and a larger treatment plan, but again, I think that is only running pre-treatment and not tertiary treatments.

**KG: What has been the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis on the water shortage and waste management problems?**

KES: One has to understand that we are talking about one to 1.5 million—so, more than a quarter of the population. One refugee for every three to four Lebanese, which is a tremendous amount. So there is obviously more waste-water generated and a higher need for domestic water, but I think it is important to highlight that refugees living in tented settlements get a ration of thirty-five liters per person, which is not a lot of water, through humanitarian agencies. These make up fifteen to twenty percent of refugees and are mostly in the Beqaa. The majority of refugees rent places in varying states of disrepair. It certainly has increased the pressure on the water infrastructure, but it has also not been mitigated by the government, which has taken a very hands-off approach to managing the Syrian refugees. It has an impact, but I do not think one should overstate it. Syrian refugees are used as scapegoats to hide that these problems are rooted in longstanding policies or their purposeful absence. In both cases, they predate the first refugee flows from Syria.



*[Litani river close to a tented settlement of Syrian refugees. (July 2016) Image by Paul Cochrane.]*

**KG: Do you expect the scale of the problems highlighted in the documentary to come as a surprise to Lebanese citizens?**

**KES:** I think the scale, yes. Some of the issues involved I think a lot of Lebanese know to a degree that this is happening in parts. People do talk about it. I am hoping the documentary shows how these things are interconnected. We talk about pollution in how it affects productive activities, how it affects health in terms of domestic consumption, how water relates to rural development. We talk about the economy; we talk about the politics of it; we talk about social mobilization all around the issue of water. We are trying to show that politics are a central aspect, and I do not think that is widely recognized. I think a lot of people fall into this allure of the technocratic expert who says “No, no, it is just a question of management.”

**KG:** What lessons can be learned by the rest of the world and international development actors from the problems in Lebanon?

**KES:** I do not assume that they want to learn or can actually learn from it. The issues are political to the core. I think the politics is about spreading market-based solutions because they end up working to the advantage of the core capitalist countries, with the United States at the top, and with the European Union also being involved. So I do not think there is much of an interest in that. There is an interest in saying that they do development. They spend money on it, but the actual goal of it is still opening up markets and creating spaces for profit generation.

**KG:** Dr. Eid-Sabbagh, thanks for your time.

## ***We Made Every Living Thing From Water***

[*We Made Every Living Thing From Water* will be available for free online viewing on YouTube in English (<https://youtu.be/reJEh0jM5-8>) and Arabic (<https://youtu.be/wO9yfG6H1Ws>) or on Vimeo in English (<https://vimeo.com/259600292>) and Arabic (<https://vimeo.com/285329026>).]