Urooj Amjad's original inspiration for working on water issues was to explore water's use as a tool for cooperation rather than conflict. In 1998, she researched Israel-Palestine water management issues. In emphasizing cooperation, she explored her related interest in how societies adapt to difficult political, economic and environmental circumstances.

“Water management is a window to understanding these complicated and life-relevant issues,” Amjad says. “Inspiration for continuing my research on water issues evolved toward providing water services for all household water users and the efficient management of our resources. As a society, we design formal and informal rules to guide our behavior for desirable outcomes. Understanding the relationship between the intentions, rules that get us there, and the desirable outcomes are motivation for me to analyze institutional behavior, regulation and policy, as I did more recently in the fully privatized water sector in the U.K.”

Water management needs to be understood as part of a wider system. One of the Water Institute at UNC’s research programs now examines how decision-making works and the role information plays in contributing to improved water, sanitation and hygiene. These background motivations form part of my growing interest in the relationship between water, energy and food. —Urooj Amjad

I was raised in a typical suburban community. As I grew older, I became aware and concerned with the disparity in the quality of life of people around the world. This became evident through the types of questions people asked themselves. My questions revolved around How should I best live my life? or What should I do to be happy? Others of my same age must ask How can I make money to pay for my mother’s medication? or Will this job pay enough so that I can send my children to school?

How is one to feel about these very different realities? I don’t know the answer. I do know that, by chance, I am part of a very small percentage of the global population with the advantages to respond to these inequalities. I believe everyone should have the right to grow in an environment in which they can achieve to the best of their abilities. This is a distant dream for the current state of the world, but I believe it is a goal worth striving toward. Oftentimes, we are kept from the dream by environments that cause poor health outcomes or vulnerability to poor health outcomes. Improving water and sanitation
“My Aunty Dot died of lung cancer soon after I entered college,” Kapuaola Gellert recalls. “She never smoked. Her death made me wonder whether Hawaiians have a higher incidence of cancer compared to other ethnic groups.”

The loss of her aunt was the beginning of Gellert’s interest in epidemiology, leading her to complete a Master of Public Health degree. After graduation, she worked with the Native Hawaiian Health Care system, Na Pu’uwai, serving the islands of Moloka’i and Lana’i. “During the three years I lived on Moloka’i,” she says, “I developed a healthy lifestyle program, which included visits by doctors and dietitians from Oahu to evaluate the medical conditions of the program’s participants. The results showed statistically significant improvements in the participants’ blood pressure, cholesterol and weight. I realized I could help Hawaiians the most if I left Moloka’i to pursue my doctorate in epidemiology at UNC.”

On Moloka’i, Gellert met Ron Aubert, PhD, alumnus of UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health’s epidemiology doctoral program, who was working as a consultant on the island. Aubert became Gellert’s mentor and introduced her to UNC, and subsequently, to Anna Maria Siega-Riz, PhD, professor of epidemiology and nutrition and associate dean for academic affairs at the School. “Dr. Siega-Riz has advised me while I collaborate with colleagues on Moloka’i to develop research plans focused on the Hawaiian community,” Gellert says.