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Improving the Performance of a Forced-flow Desalination Unit Using a Vortex Generator

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 4 November 2023
Received in revised form 30 December 2023
Accepted 22 Januari 2024
Available online April 2024

Keywords:
Desalination; solar still; evaporation; vortex generator; condenser

ABSTRACT

Water is a primary need for living creatures, and water scarcity can trigger a crisis. Water scarcity is becoming an issue in Indonesia, especially in coastal village areas, including salt-producing areas. Salt production involves evaporating large amounts of seawater in concentration ponds. Using evaporated seawater as a source of clean water would reduce the risk of water scarcity. Therefore, this study aims to obtain fresh water by condensing water vapour that evaporates in a desalination unit. More specifically, the study uses a vortex generator to increase the rate and efficiency of evaporation in a forced-flow desalination unit. This research was conducted indoors to reduce uncontrollable variables. An evaporation container with a volume of 0.35 m^3 was filled with seawater. The rate of evaporation in the desalination unit with a vortex generator was compared to that in a unit without a vortex generator. The results show that the vortex generator leads to faster evaporation. The rate of evaporation with a vortex generator was 13% higher than that without a vortex generator, and the gained output ratio increased 14% with the vortex generator. Therefore, it can be concluded that vortex generators can improve the performance of desalination equipment.

1. Introduction

Humans and other living creatures need water to live. As the global population increases, the need for water will increase as well; a global population increase of 15% will reduce the amount of available fresh water by 40% [1]. Without changes to the use and treatment of water, this will lead to water scarcity [2], which is predicted to impact half of the world's population by 2025 [3]. Water is so important that it can raise issues related to human rights, politics and even racism [4]. Since physical water scarcity is often associated with agricultural production, growing human populations and state sovereignty, it is almost certain that water scarcity will trigger various crises [5]. In addition to being a global threat, water scarcity has become an urgent issue in specific parts of the world, including Indonesia.

Indonesia, an archipelagic country, has the longest coastline in the world, so many people live in coastal areas. Unfortunately, coastal village communities often experience severe water scarcity.

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https://doi.org/10.37934/cfdl.13.X.XX

There are 12,827 coastal villages throughout Indonesia, and only 66.54% of these villages have regular access to clean water. Thus, coastal villagers use turbid and salty water for daily needs, such as washing and bathing, and buy drinking water; many members of these coastal village communities are salt farmers.

There is a high demand for salt in Indonesia. The Indonesian salt industry still uses traditional mining methods, which involve injecting seawater into ponds and evaporating it. The evaporation of seawater in concentration ponds is very dependent on water surface pressure and temperature [6]. Therefore, if the sun's heat is blocked or the wind is still, the rate of evaporation slows. However, making salt requires evaporating large amounts of water.

Sea water in the concentration pond, with a salinity of 30–45‰ or 3–4.5 °Be [7], is allowed to evaporate into the environment. To concentrate 1,000 litres of seawater to 30–45 °Be, about 900 litres of seawater must be evaporated. A concentration pool for salt mining can contain up to 10,000 litres of seawater, which undergoes a concentration process lasting four to five days [7]. Collecting and condensing this evaporated seawater could provide 9,000 litres of clean water. A large amount of this water could then be used by villagers. Thus, the ability to collect and use water that evaporates from salt fields would significantly benefit Indonesia's coastal villages. However, recovering moisture from salt fields without reducing salt production is a challenge. Little research has been done on the use of desalination to produce fresh water and salt [8]. A simpler solution would be to evaporate the seawater in evaporation chambers similar to solar stills.

Solar still is a simple device that uses the greenhouse effect [9] to convert salt water or wastewater into clean water by evaporating and condensing it [10]. Even though its productivity is low, because its operation is easy and economical, various studies have explored ways to increase the productivity of solar distillation equipment [11]. Methods for increasing the production of solar still fall into four categories: hybrid solar stills, stills with reflectors and concentrators, stills with condensers and stills with absorbers. Several types of absorbers can increase the productivity of solar stills. These approaches include changing the type of heat absorber [12, 13] using a wick [14-17], using fins [18-20], adding reflectors [21-23] and adding a heat collector. Furthermore, according to Nasri [24], solar still heat absorbers can use materials such as gravel, sand or polyurethane, and it is easy to add such materials to speed the evaporation process. The expansion of the absorber increases the water temperature, while the addition of a condenser increases the heat absorption capabilities of the water vapour. Increasing the rate of air flow over the surface of the water also increases the rate of evaporation. The air flow causes the pressure above the water surface to decrease, resulting in evaporation [25]. Some studies have used increased air flow in solar stills to increase the rate of evaporation [26, 27] but so far, few solar stills have used vortex generators to increase the rate of evaporation.

A vortex generator reduces air pressure, thereby increasing the difference in pressure between the surface of the water and the air above it. This pressure difference is the driving force for evaporation [28]. A vortex generator also increases heat transfer [29] by creating turbulence and vortices [30]. Vortex generators can increase heat transfer in cooling tower ducts [31] by increasing the speed of air flow around the tip of the vortex generator [32]. An increase in flow velocity creates vortices, lowering the surface pressure of the water and increasing the rate of evaporation. Thus, the present study aims to explore the impact of air flow on evaporation and condensation in salt field desalination units using a vortex generator. Therefore, various amounts of air flow were tested with constant heat. Each variation in air flow underwent two treatments: one without a vortex generator and one with a vortex generator. In addition, a condenser is used to condense water vapour; previous studies have proven that the addition of internal and external condensers has been shown to increase the efficiency of solar stills [33-40]. Solar still efficiency can also be increased by expanding the condensation surface [41]; increasing the condensation surface by 7.5 times increases freshwater production by more than 50% [42]. Specifically, this paper examines the impact of a vortex generator on the rate of evaporation in a forced-flow desalination unit.

2. Methodology

2.1 Experimental Setup

This research was conducted indoors to reduce uncontrolled variables [43], as shown in Figure 1. Three lamp units with a total power of 3,000 watts were used to maintain a constant solar radiance at 500 watts/m^2. As shown in the research scheme in Figure 2, water was pumped from the water reservoir to the water level control, which was connected to the evaporation chamber. Thus, the water level in the evaporation chamber remained the same as that in the water level control. The evaporation chamber holds 350 litres of water. Water level control has an overflow channel, and the water level is determined by the height of the overflow. The water emerging from the overflow flows back into the seawater reservoir. When evaporation occurs in the evaporation chamber, water from the water level control flows into the evaporation chamber to equalize the level. Because the water level is maintained by the overflow, the reduction in water volume or weight in the seawater reservoir is proportional to the volume of water that evaporates in the evaporation chamber. In addition to water circulation, the system also includes air flow. The direction of the air flow is shown by the arrow in Figure 1. The air flow at a rate of 2 m/s is caused by fan suction. Air flow was tested in a desalination unit with (D-VG) and without a vortex generator (D-NVG). The vortex generator was attached to the top cover of the evaporation container so that it could be removed and replaced with a cover that did not include a vortex generator. The vortex generator was 9.4 mm high and mounted on the inside of the glass cover. The ratio of the height vortex generator to that of the glass cover is 0.47 [44]; the width of the vortex generator is the same as that of the glass cover. The first vortex generator was placed 286 mm from the air inlet, and the second vortex generator was placed 286 mm from the first. Thus, the longitudinal pitch ratio of the distance between the vortex generators and the length of the cover was 0.2 [45]. Four vortex generators were used, all placed 286 mm apart. A schematic of forced-flow desalination is shown in Figure 2. Data were collected every five minutes. A simulation of the system was also conducted using computational fluid dynamics (CFD).

Fig. 1. Forced-flow desalination experimental rig

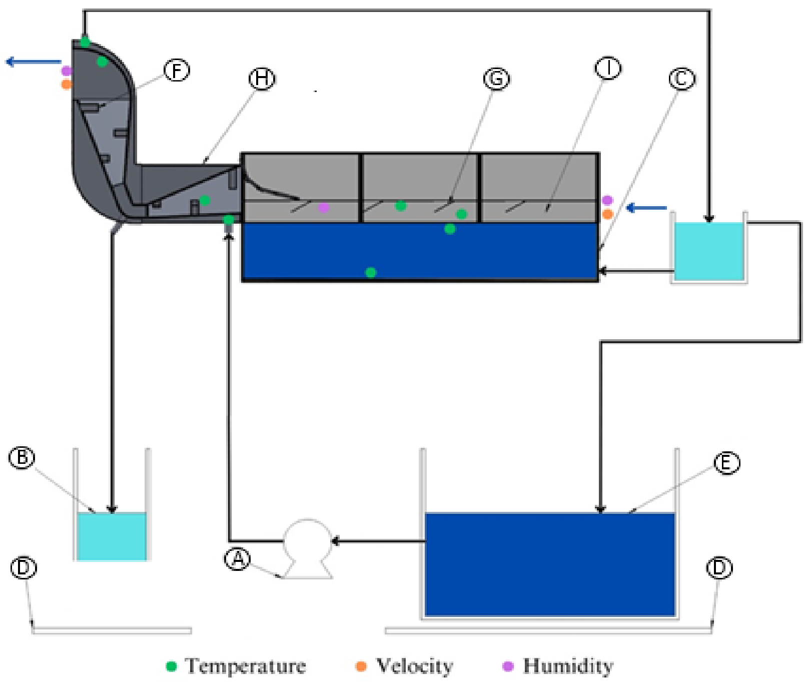


Fig. 2. Schematic of the forced-flow desalination experimental rig. (A) Circulation pump, (B) Freshwater reservoir, (C) Sea water, (D) Scale, (E) Condenser cooling water reservoir, (F) Vortex generator in condenser, (G) Vortex generator, (H) Condenser, (I) Evaporation chamber. The coloured dots show the locations of the sensors; the arrows show the direction of air flow

Many previous studies have included CFD simulations [46-49]. In the present study, a simulation was created using Cradle CFD software by Hexagon. There are three governing equations in fluid dynamics: the continuity equation, the momentum equation and the energy equation.

Integral form continuity equation:

$$\frac{\partial}{\partial t}\iiint_{V} \rho dV + \iint_{A} \rho\vec{V} \cdot d\vec{A} = 0 \quad (1)$$

Differential form continuity equation:

$$\frac{\partial \rho}{\partial t} + \rho\vec{\nabla} \cdot \vec{V} = 0 \quad (2)$$

Momentum equation in the x-axis direction:

$$\frac{\partial(\rho u)}{\partial t} + \vec{\nabla} \cdot \left(\rho u\vec{V}\right) = -\frac{\partial p}{\partial x} + \frac{\partial \tau_{xx}}{\partial x} + \frac{\partial \tau_{yx}}{\partial y} + \frac{\partial \tau_{zx}}{\partial z} + \rho f_x \quad (3)$$

The momentum equation in the y-axis direction:

$$\frac{\partial(\rho v)}{\partial t} + \vec{\nabla} \cdot \left(\rho v\vec{V}\right) = -\frac{\partial p}{\partial y} + \frac{\partial \tau_{xy}}{\partial x} + \frac{\partial \tau_{yy}}{\partial y} + \frac{\partial \tau_{zy}}{\partial z} + \rho f_y \quad (4)$$

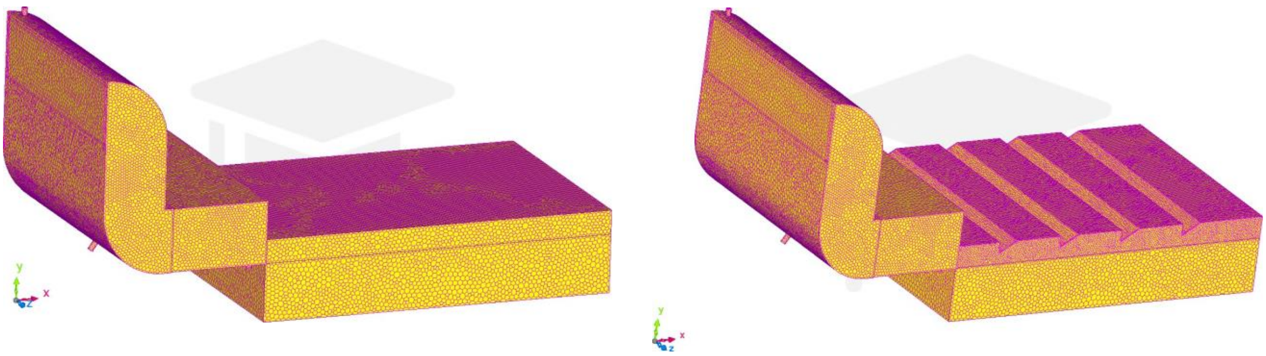
The momentum equation in the z-axis direction:

$$\frac{\partial(\rho w)}{\partial t} + \vec{\nabla}\cdot\left(\rho w\vec{V}\right) = -\frac{\partial p}{\partial z} + \frac{\partial \tau_{xz}}{\partial x} + \frac{\partial \tau_{yz}}{\partial y} + \frac{\partial \tau_{zz}}{\partial z} + \rho f_z \quad (5)$$

The energy equation is written in the form of internal energy:

$$\frac{\partial}{\partial t}\left[\rho\left(e + \frac{V^2}{2}\right)\right] + \vec{\nabla}\cdot\left[\rho\left(e + \frac{V^2}{2}\right)\vec{V}\right] = \rho\dot{q} - \frac{\partial(\rho p)}{\partial x} - \frac{\partial(vp)}{\partial y} - \frac{\partial(wp)}{\partial z} + \rho\vec{f}\cdot\vec{V} \quad (6)$$

In CFD, meshing or discretization is used to convert a continuous fluid domain into a discrete computational domain. This approach allows fluid equations to be solved using numerical methods. An efficient mesh is very important in multiphase simulations because it impacts the accuracy of the simulation [50]. A hexahedron mesh was used here; this mesh has good resolution and high computational efficiency. For more detailed analyses, a polyhedral mesh was used in the present study, which can simulate the movements of objects along a high curvature (Figure 3). When creating a CFD simulation, it is also necessary to conduct a grid independence test [51, 52] as shown in Figure 4.



(a) (b)

Fig. 3. A CFD hexahedron mesh (a) without vortex generator (b) using vortex generator

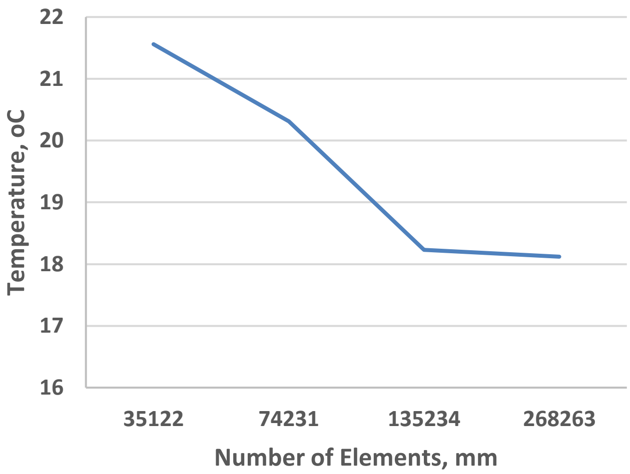


Fig. 4. Grid independence test

Data were collected using the tools listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Tools used in the study

No.	Factor	Tools	Specification
1	Temperature	Thermometer	40–400 °C, 0.09%
2	Solar radiance	Solar meter	0–2000 W/m^2
3	Wind velocity	Wind meter	0–30 m/s
4	Relative humidity	Hygrometer	10%–99%
5	Weight	Digital balance	0–20 kg ± 0,1

3. Results

The temperature of the water and the air flowing over the water significantly impact the rate of evaporation, while the condenser temperature determines the amount of water vapour that can be condensed, as shown in Figure 5.

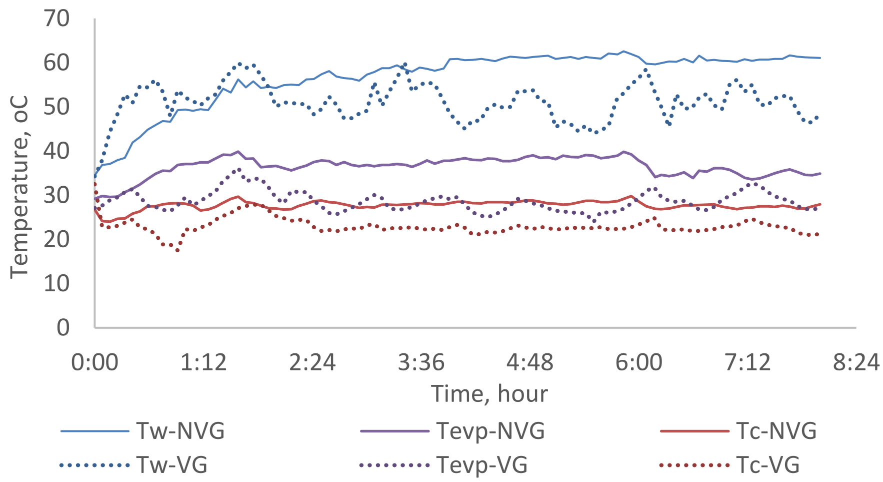


Fig. 5. Water temperature (Tw), air flow temperature (Tev) and condenser temperature (Tc) in the desalination units with (Tw-VG, Tev-VG and Tc-VG) and without a vortex generator (Tw-NVG, Tev-VG and Tc-VG)

As shown in Figure 5, the water temperature was lower with a vortex generator (Tw-VG) than without it (Tw-NVG). The average Tw-VG and TW-NVG were 51.42 °C and 58.06 °C, respectively. The air flow temperature is a mix of the temperature of the air entering from outside and the temperature of the evaporated water vapour. The air flow temperature was generally lower with the vortex generator (Tev-VG) than without it (Tev-NVG). Although Tev-VG was lower than Tev-NVG, the difference between the temperature of the water and that of the vapour in the D-VG was greater than the difference between the temperature of the water and the vapour in the D-NVG; these differences were 25.72 °C and 21.18 °C, respectively. This temperature difference is proportional to the pressure difference [28] and promotes evaporation. Tc-VG was lower than Tc-NVG; the average difference between these temperatures was 2.36 °C because Tev-VG entering the condenser is lower than Tev-NVG. The temperature during evaporation predicted by the simulation did not differ much from the temperature recorded in the experiment, as shown in Figure 6.

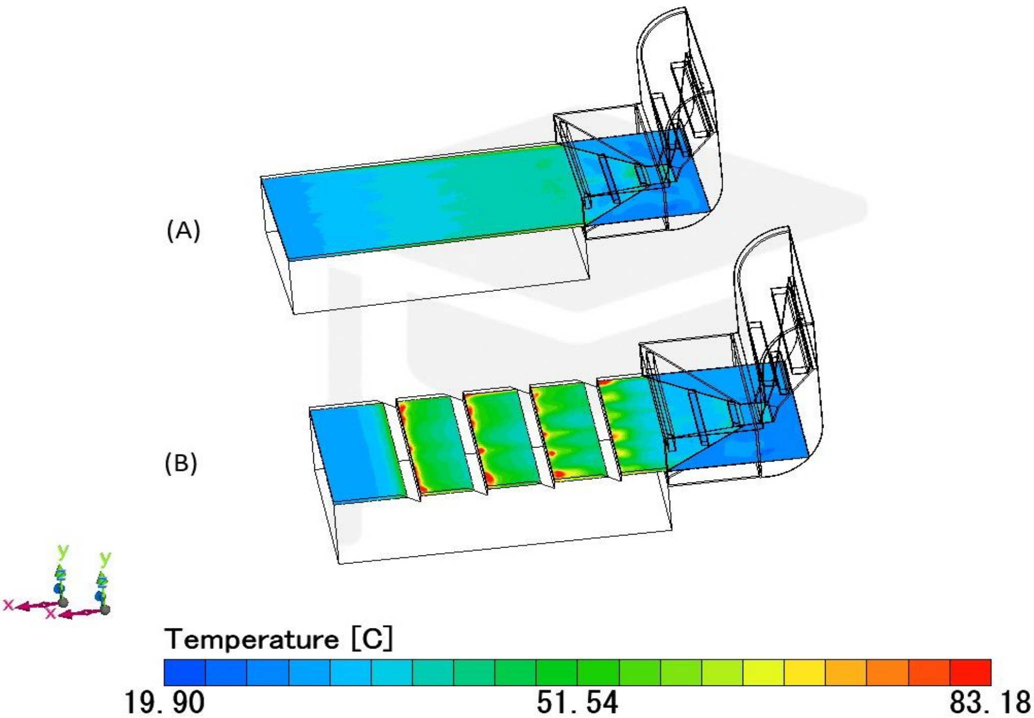


Fig. 6. Temperature distribution (A) without vortex generator (B) with a vortex generator

As shown in Figure 6, the temperature of the water surface with a vortex generator is about 50 °C; it is about 55 °C without the vortex generator. The speed of air flow increases around the tip of the vortex generator, thus reducing the water temperature. This increase in air flow speed can be seen in Figure 7.

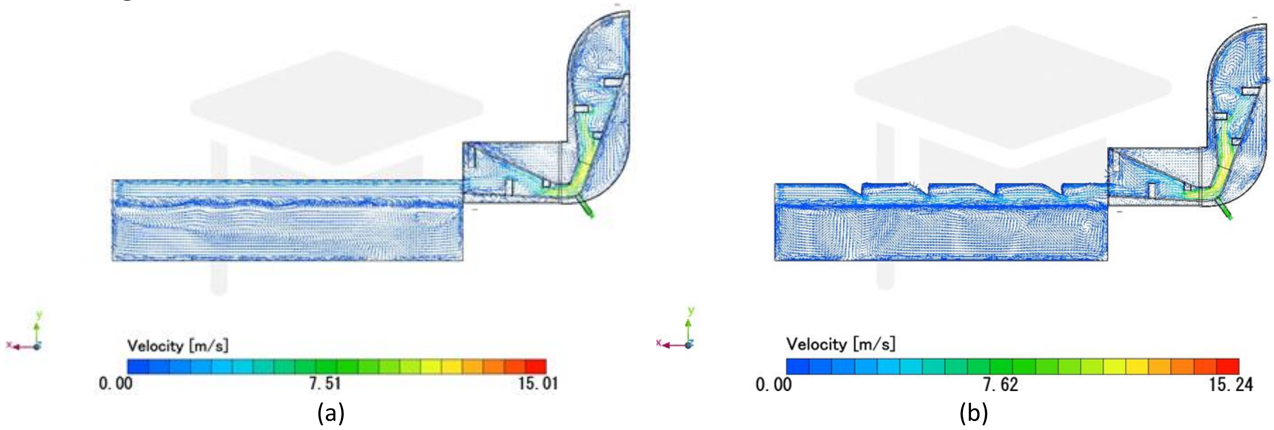


Fig. 7. Air flow velocity (a) without vortex generator (b) with a vortex generator

As shown in Figure 7, the rate of air flow without the vortex generator was about 2.28 m/s; without the vortex generator, the air speed tends to remain constant throughout the evaporation chamber. With a vortex generator, the air flow speed increases around the tip of the vortex generator. This increase in speed causes a drop in air pressure at the tip of the vortex generator; this drop does not occur without the vortex generator [53]. This shift increases the difference in air pressure, encouraging faster evaporation, as shown in Figure 8.

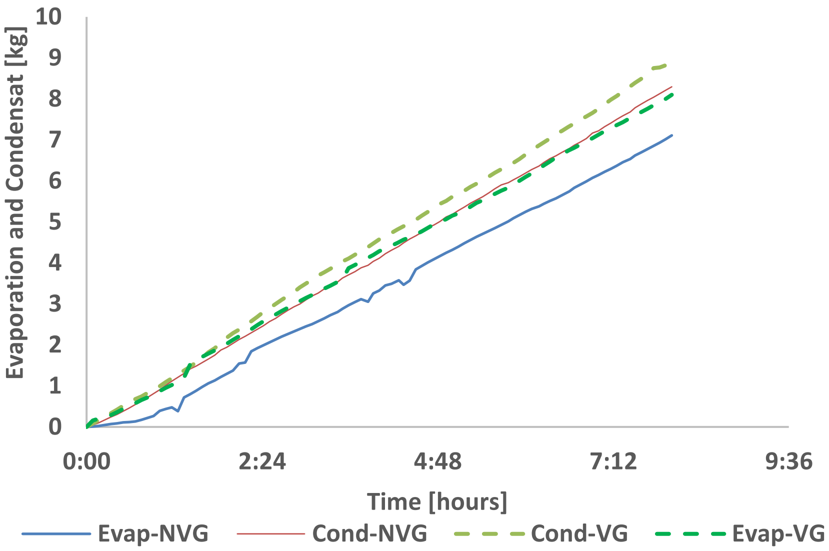


Fig. 8. Evaporation and condensation with (Evap-VG and Cond-VG) and without (Evap-NVG and Cond-NVG) a vortex generator

Figure 8 illustrates evaporation and condensation with (Evap-VG and Cond-VG) and without (Evap-NVG and Cond-VG) vortex generators. Evap-VG was consistently greater than Evap-NVG; on average, the difference was 1.13 times greater. Condensation was also greater with the vortex generator; the average relative humidity after evaporation was 56.5% without the vortex generator and 67.6% with it. With the vortex generator, 91% of the condensation evaporated; without it, only 86% of the condensation evaporated. Thus, the D-VG created more water vapour than the D-NVG. The Reynolds number (Re) was also higher with a vortex generator than without it. The Reynolds number is calculated as follows:

$$Re = \frac{\rho V x}{\mu}, \quad (7)$$

Where the dynamic viscosity μ, density of air ρ and length x were taken as 1.954×10^{-5} kg/ms, 1.09 kg/m^3 and 0.025 m, respectively. The evaporation coefficient (h_{ew}) and convection coefficient (h_{cw}) can be calculated based on evaporation [54]; the results of evaporation per hour (m_w) for a solar still are [55] as follows:

$$m_w = \frac{h_{ew}\left(T_w - T_{evp}\right)}{h_{fg}} \; x \; 3600, \quad (8)$$

where the latent heat of evaporation (h_{fg}) were taken as 2.372.099. The convection coefficient was obtained from the following equation:

$$h_{e,w-gi} = 0{,}0163 \; x \; h_{cw}\left[\frac{P_w - P_{evp}}{T_w - T_{ev}}\right], \quad (9)$$

Where P_w and P_{evp} are partial vapour pressure at the water surface temperature and partial vapour pressure at the evaporation chamber, respectively. The results can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2
Reynolds Number (Re), evaporation coefficient (h_{ew}) and convection coefficient (h_{cw})

	Re	h_{ew}	h_{cw}
Without vortex generator	6,626.29	1,148.92	124.76
With vortex generator	7,729.21	3,543.10	560.74

Without a vortex generator, Re was 6.626.29; with it, Re was 7,731.12, 1.15 times greater. A higher Reynolds number indicates more counter-rotating vortices [56] and also leads to an increase in the mass transfer coefficient [57], hence increasing the convection and evaporation rate, which is indicated by increasing the convection coefficient (h_{cw}) and evaporation (h_{ew}).

As mentioned above, greater evaporation leads to higher condensation. This finding also aligns with the simulation. Since the yield of water vapour was higher with the vortex generator than without it, the D-VG was more efficient than the D-NVG (Table 3).

The efficiency of the system is measured by the gained output ratio (GOR), which can be expressed as [58]:

$$GOR = \frac{\sum m_w \cdot h_{fg}}{Q_{in}} \tag{10}$$

Table 3
System efficiency and comparison

	GOR	η	
Flat plate evaporator	4.49		[59]
Thermal collector–evaporator	3.99		[60]
With vortex generator	1.53	76.1%	
Without vortex generator	1.34	66.4%	
Air heating counter flow	0.62		[61]
Air motion in solar still		55.6%	[62]
Natural circulation loop		45.15%	[63]

As shown in Table 3, efficiency or can be measured as GOR [64, 65]; the D-VG is 1.14 times more efficient than the D-NVG. Although several studies show higher GOR values, the system used is different and can be used in further research. However, when compared with solar desalination, the efficiency of using a vortex generator is higher. Therefore, a vortex generator is very useful for increasing the rate of evaporation.

4. Conclusions

The results of this study show that a vortex generator increases the rate of evaporation. In the unit with a vortex generator, evaporation occurred 1.13 times faster than without a vortex generator. This means that more fresh water was produced. Thus, a vortex generator can increase the efficiency of a desalination unit. In this study, GOR or efficiency increased from 1.53 in a unit without a vortex generator to 1.34 in a unit with a vortex generator. Therefore, it can be concluded that vortex generators can improve the performance of desalination equipment.

Acknowledgements
This research was funded by a grant from Menristekdikti (1422/LL3/AL.04/2023) and supported by the Office of Research and Development at Universitas Muhammadiyah Prof. Dr HAMKA (164/F.03.07/2023).

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