

March 2024

# InnWater Article

## #3 Water Governance



**INN WATER**

Promoting social innovation to renew  
multi-level and cross sector water governance



### Europe standing at a fork in the River

In an interconnected global landscape, water remains the lifeblood of our socio-ecological systems, the vital resource supporting agriculture, energy, and other crucial sectors, all while transcending national and regional boundaries. Yet, human activities exert unprecedented pressure on European and global water systems, altering the quantity and timing of freshwater flows through activities like water extraction, land use changes, and climate change.

The strain on water systems is so intense that it is causing disruptions in the water cycle, such as severe alterations in river flow regimes and increases in the frequency and severity of floods and droughts. Additionally, it causes a decline in the resilience of aquatic ecosystems, through biodiversity loss and deteriorating water quality. The impacts of climate change exacerbate these challenges, heightening the vulnerability of water systems to extreme weather events, and threatening the long-term water supply. In Europe, water stress affects 20% of the territory, with 30% of the population impacted annually<sup>1</sup>, and groundwater aquifers continue to face significant depletion.

---

<sup>1</sup> European Environment Agency. (2021). Water resources across Europe — confronting water stress: an updated assessment (ISBN 978-92-9480-391-7). ISSN 1977-8449. doi:10.2800/320975

## Changing Landscape, Changing Solutions

Water is deeply embedded in our social fabric. This, coupled with the fact that water-related challenges are specific to their local context and characteristics, paints a complex picture of how water governance can look like. It plays out differently in different localities, social systems, economic sectors, environments, hydrological conditions, and geographies - across scales, and over stretches of time periods and seasons. This means costs and benefits are also complex and unevenly distributed. This is also true for Europe, where water challenges are increasingly experienced everywhere, however unevenly.

Water governance needs to account for all complexities. Due to the interconnected nature of water challenges, tackling them requires going beyond isolated responses that neglect the interplay between policy and sectoral issues such as climate, agriculture, and biodiversity. Instead, resolutions need to move towards resilience and sustainability. This interconnectedness also provides opportunity for action on SDG 6, on Clean Water and Sanitation, which has been identified as a multiplier in many other areas for positive change toward sustainable development on a global scale.

To achieve intended outcomes of socio-ecological resilience and sustainability, integrating good governance qualities in governance processes is critical. The importance of aligning local governance with understanding and addressing water challenges cannot be overstated, as solutions must be context-specific to the locality, and involve coordination across both administrative and sectoral boundaries.



*Engraved low water markings, also known as hunger markings. Recent record low year 2018 is still visible. These markings are found at the Elbe river at Pillnitz near Dresden, Germany. Credits: Daniel Albach / Shutterstock*

In the EU, local water governance actors need to consider a patchwork architecture of differently implemented regulation and policy goals from the EU, national, and regional levels that address cross-cutting issues. Fragmented governance approaches have hindered effective management, emphasizing the need for good governance principles such as accountability and transparency. Contemporary views on governance emphasise the importance of engaging multiple actors and stakeholders in problem-solution formulation and participatory processes, which helps characterise and solve complex problems. Involvement and engagement of citizens can further increase fairness, relevance, acceptance, and sustainability of strategic policy goals.

Moving forward, there is a critical need for coordinated action at all levels, from local to global, to ensure the sustainability of Europe's water systems. By prioritizing good governance principles and diagnostic approaches to water governance, embracing social innovation, and fostering multi-stakeholder engagement, Europe can navigate its water challenges and work towards a more resilient and sustainable future.

## Water Governance - Definition

*Water governance, defined as "the range of political, institutional and administrative rules, practices and processes (formal and informal) through which decisions are taken and implemented, stakeholders can articulate their interests and have their concerns considered, and decision makers are held accountable for water management", is ultimately a means to an end<sup>2</sup>.*

## Link with InnWater

The five Pilot sites of the InnWater Project exemplify how water challenges manifest and impact water systems and create second-order effects. They also display the interplay of tension between levels and sectors, while highlighting the need for coordinated efforts toward water sustainability and resilience.

InnWater seeks to be part of ensuring water system sustainability, aiming to provide a water governance diagnostic tool, while promoting social innovation to renew multi-level and cross-sector water governance associated with economic and financial mechanisms that support the EU Green Deal transition.

**Authors:** Gustav, Thungren, Stockholm International Water Institute, [Gustav.thungren@siwi.org](mailto:Gustav.thungren@siwi.org)

---

<sup>2</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2015). OECD Principles on Water Governance. OECD Publishing: Paris, France.

## Disclaimer

This document reflects only the author's view. The European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

## Intellectual Property Rights

© 2023-2026, InnWater consortium

All rights reserved.

This document contains original unpublished work except where clearly indicated otherwise. Acknowledgement of previously published material and of the work of others has been made through appropriate citation, quotation or both.

This document is the property of the InnWater consortium members. No copying or distributing, in any form or by any means, is allowed without the prior written agreement of the owner of the property rights. In addition to such written permission, the source must be clearly referenced.

## Project Consortium



Funded by  
the European Union



UK Research  
and Innovation