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**INN WATER**

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

# **D2.3: Assessing Water Governance: recommendations for water managers**

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**Delivery date: 31/01/2026**

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## Related deliverables

This deliverable is closely related to several others, including D2.1 "Enhanced Water Governance Assessment Tool," D2.2 "Innovation in Water Governance: Reference Guide for Programming," D4.1 "Water Governance Diagnostic Tool," D5.4 "Pilot Sites Implementation Final Report," and D6.8 "Replication Methodology and Implementation Progress #V2." It builds upon work developed in some of these deliverables while partially compiling findings and insights from others.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across Europe and beyond, water systems are under increasing pressure from climate change, environmental degradation, competing water uses, and institutional fragmentation. Floods, droughts, biodiversity loss, and water scarcity are no longer future risks—they are current management challenges. While technical solutions are often available, weak or misaligned governance arrangements frequently limit their effectiveness. Roles and responsibilities may be unclear, coordination across sectors and levels of government can be difficult, and stakeholders are not always meaningfully involved in decision-making. In this context, assessing water governance is essential to understand not only what problems exist, but why they persist and how governance structures can be strengthened to deliver more resilient, sustainable, and inclusive water outcomes.

The InnWater governance assessment framework and associated tool provide water managers with a structured way to reflect on how water governance functions in practice. Building on the OECD Principles on Water Governance and extending them to better address sustainability and climate resilience, the framework helps users assess governance strengths, identify gaps, and prioritise areas for improvement. Rather than prescribing one “right” governance model, InnWater is designed to be flexible and adaptable to different institutional, cultural, and geographic contexts. It supports water managers in translating abstract governance principles into concrete discussions, shared understanding, and actionable steps, while encouraging long-term thinking around resilience, sustainability, and inclusive decision-making.

The InnWater framework and tool were validated through a three-step process involving different audiences and real-world settings. First, an online two-round Delphi consultation with selected water governance experts assessed the overall structure, coherence, and relevance of the framework. Second, five structured focus group consultations were held with potential users from different water-related sectors across Europe to test usability, clarity, and practical value. Third, the framework was applied in project pilot sites through in-person workshops, allowing water managers and stakeholders to use the tool in real governance contexts. Results from the three validation phases were grouped into key insights and implications for water managers. The document finishes by presenting a set of practical recommendations for using the InnWater governance approach in future settings to assess and contribute to improving the governance of a given context, fostering dialogues and addressing sustainability and resilience in water management.

This document is intended for water managers, river basin authorities, local and regional administrations, policy-makers, and practitioners involved in water governance. It is also relevant for facilitators, consultants, and organisations supporting participatory water management processes. The document can be used as a practical guide to understand why governance assessment matters, how the InnWater framework can support governance improvement, and how to apply the tool in different contexts.

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## ACRONYMS

<b>InnWater</b>	Promoting social INNOvation to renew multi-level and cross sector WATER governance
<b>PS</b>	Pilot sites
<b>WGA</b>	Water governance assessment
<b>WP</b>	Work Package

# 1. WHY ASSESSING WATER GOVERNANCE MATTERS

Current environmental trends, such as climate change and environmental degradation, are **intensifying existing water challenges**, including scarcity, pollution, infrastructure damage, and potential conflicts, as noted by the European Environment Agency in its 2024 Climate Risk Assessment. With critical projections for the next decades regarding population living in water-stressed areas, rising demand for freshwater, and foreseen impacts on national GDPs due to water scarcity (UNICEF Global Annual Results Report 2023), it is critical to have solid institutions, processes, and legislation that can cope with such challenges, considering the sustainability of water systems. Water governance, namely the actors, rules, and processes that determine how water resources are managed, distributed and developed, shapes how decisions are made about "who gets what water, when, and how"<sup>1</sup>. That is why it is often said that **"water crises are often water governance crises"**.

Since weak or fragmented governance structures can become a major roadblock for achieving desirable water outcomes, there is a need for **good governance structures that promote coordination among actors, long-term planning, and inclusivity in stakeholders voices**. Without proper governance, even the most complete, best-intentioned management plans and strategies can fail.

Water managers, ranging from river basin authorities to municipal utilities, operate within a high-stakes environment where responsibilities are frequently fragmented. While one agency may oversee wastewater treatment, others manage flood mitigation or agricultural irrigation permits. This fragmented institutional landscape often leads to "policy silos," where **a decision made in one sector inadvertently undermines the goals of another** (United Nations World Water Development Report 2024). In this way, water managers must navigate sometimes contradictory mandates, such as promoting intensive agriculture while simultaneously aiming for ecosystem restoration, where long-term sustainability is often sacrificed for short-term economic gains. Moreover, effective water management requires the "buy-in" of diverse communities, yet many regions lack formal mechanisms for inclusive decision-making, rendering this absence of transparent communication channels often a trigger of social conflict and unequal water distribution.

Traditional governance models often fail to address the root causes of water management problems. Many existing frameworks remain overly centralized, creating a "top-down" bottleneck. By excluding local communities and indigenous knowledge from the decision-making process, authorities often overlook site-specific ecological signals and social needs. This lack of subsidiarity, where decisions are made at the most local level possible, leads to solutions that may be technically sound but socially resisted or culturally inappropriate. Conversely, where authority is devolved, it is often done so without a unifying strategy. This results in a fragmented landscape where irrigation boards, municipal utilities, and environmental agencies operate in isolation. **These institutional silos create several outcomes such as policy contradictions**, where agricultural subsidies for thirsty crops counteract regional water conservation targets; data invisibility, where critical hydrological data is not shared across departments, leading to

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<sup>1</sup> [What is Water Governance?](#)

inaccurate flood or drought forecasting; and even fiscal inefficiency, with duplication of efforts and infrastructure that fails to leverage economies of scale.

Additionally, **water-related institutions operate with varying degrees of commitment to sustainability and resilience**; while one agency may prioritize economic cost-recovery, another may focus strictly on environmental conservation, often without a formal mechanism to reconcile the two. This fragmented mandate forces decision-makers into a "tunnel vision" approach, where short-term fixes like emergency infrastructure repairs or temporary water transfers are prioritized over the long-term systemic transformations required by a changing climate.

Responding to the abovementioned challenges, the InnWater's project oversees, among other things, **developing methodological and practical approaches for assessing water governance in Europe** and identifying potential good practices that could mobilise action in Europe, starting from five pilot sites within the region. This is the main objective of Work Package (WP) 2: *Water governance for sustainability and resilience*. The project's approach to good governance is grounded in the OECD's water governance principles (OECD, 2015), which were revisited and expanded during the project, creating the so-called InnWater enhanced governance framework. Such a framework, operationalized via an online assessment tool, aims to allow for the performing of governance assessments and identifying gaps to bridge and promote the sustainability and resilience of water systems across Europe.

In the context of methodological development, Task 2.3 of the project: *Framework validation and future governance recommendations*, aimed to carry out a three-step validation process for the InnWater governance framework and assessment tool. These topics were addressed by different audiences across various validation phases, which include the following:

1. An **online consultation** with selected experts on water governance about the **overall framework structure, coherence and relevance** to provide feedback on the framework's core elements and relations with sustainability and resilience.
2. **A set of five structured consultations** with potential user groups from different sectors across the EU to obtain relevant insights and **examine the practical use of the water governance assessment framework and its associated water governance assessment (WGA) tool** at different scales and by several sectors.
3. The application of the framework in **the project pilot sites, to test the usability of the assessment tool** in providing context-specific governance recommendations and guide the pilot sites discussion on achieving good water governance.

The findings from this validation process constitute the main results of this document, called **D2.3: Assessing Water Governance: recommendations for water managers**. This document intends to provide key insights and recommendations for water managers and water related users regarding the InnWater governance approach, namely its governance framework and associated assessment tool, contributing at the same time to the replication potential of InnWater in Europe.

## 2. THE INNWATER GOVERNANCE ASSESSMENT APPROACH

The project's governance approach and structure are defined by the InnWater governance assessment framework, which is based on the OECD Principles on Water Governance. This methodology conceptualises good water governance around 12 principles and was revisited to include four complementary aspects to represent resilience and sustainability, aiming to align with the EU 2030 Biodiversity Agenda and the EU Green Deal. To this end, the project conducted a comprehensive literature review of existing water governance assessment frameworks, and recent academic and non-academic studies related to water policy and issues of interest to the EU regarding sustainable and resilient practices.

As a result, the InnWater Governance assessment framework incorporates aspects such as the polluter pays principle (Art. 9 WFD), the restoration of freshwater ecosystems (within the 2030 EU Biodiversity Strategy), and the implications of the EU Green Deal (Figure 1).

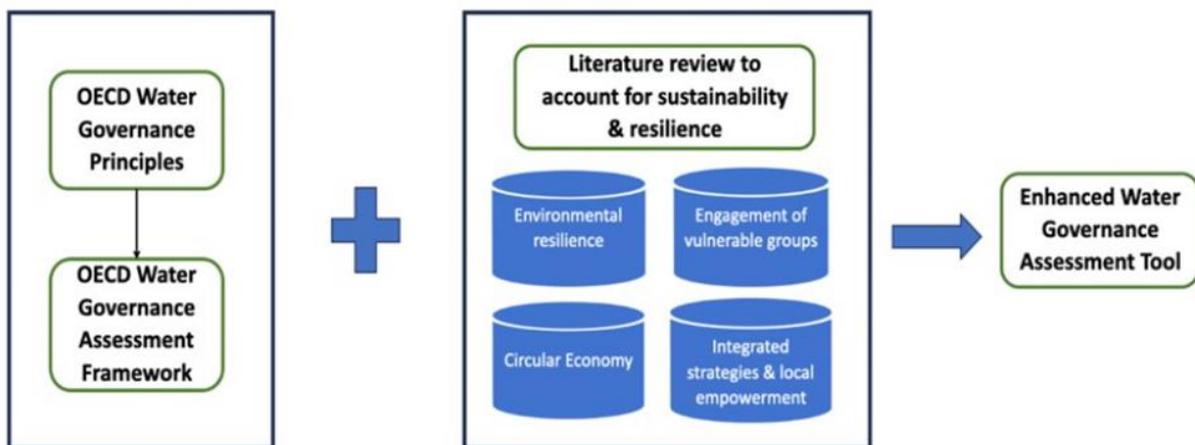


Figure 1: The process to develop the InnWater governance framework

The InnWater framework is structured around the original three dimensions and 12 principles from the OECD framework, with the addition of a new dimension (Sustainability and Resilience) that includes four new principles, namely Circular economy, Environmental resilience, Engagement of vulnerable categories and Integrated strategies and local empowerment (Figure 2).

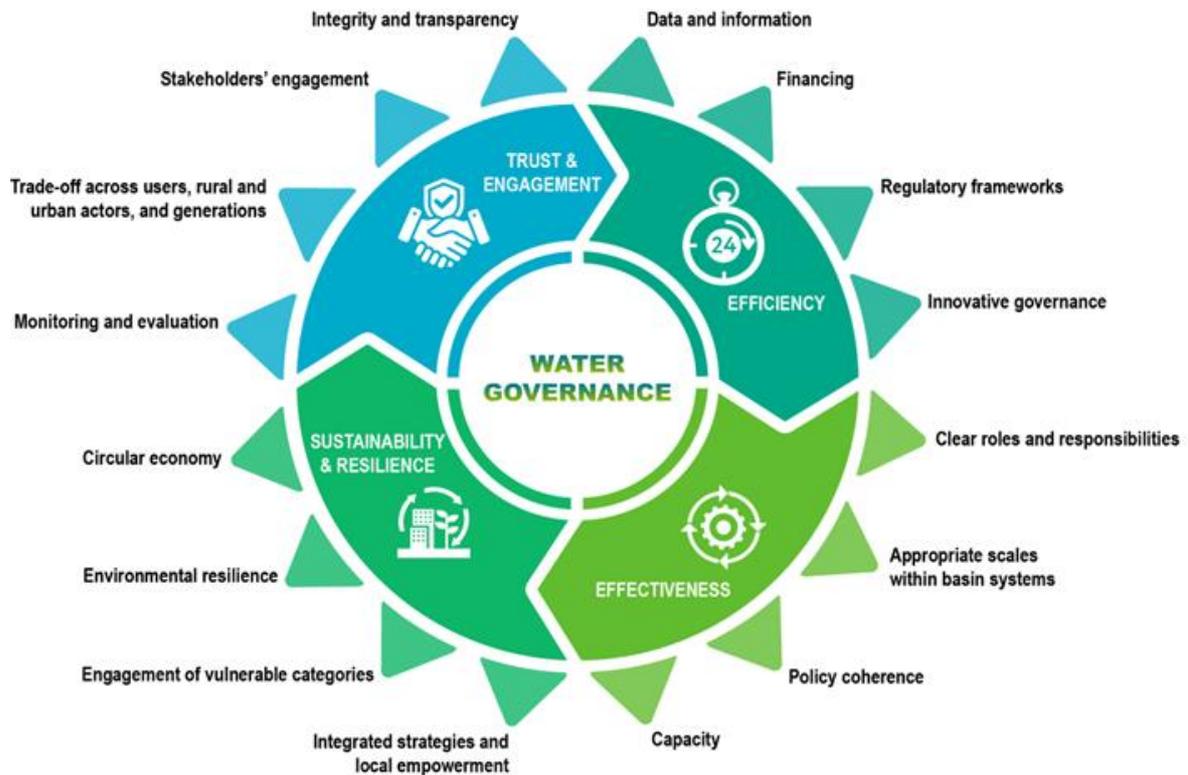
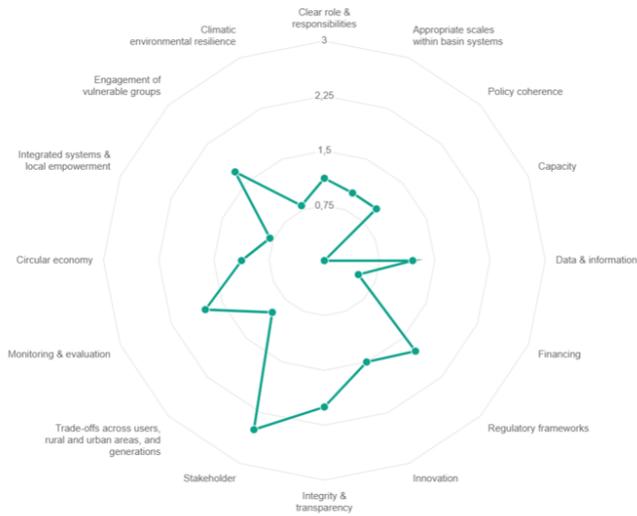


Figure 2: The InnWater Water Governance assessment framework

The framework was operationalized via a questionnaire that includes pre-existing questions from the OECD Water Governance Indicator Framework and newly developed questions encompassing the four new principles within the sustainability and resilience dimension.

Guided by the enhanced framework's principles, an online Water Governance Assessment (WGA) tool was developed to enable stakeholders to conduct rapid evaluations of local governance structures. The tool identifies critical gaps and strengths through a structured questionnaire. Upon completion, the tool generates a spider graph visualizing performance across all principles, supplemented by an AI-generated report interpreting the findings, highlighting governance gaps (i.e. principles where the score was lower than the average) and strengths.

## RESULTS



### Critical Governance Gaps

#### Capacity

Your score of 0.0 indicates a significant gap in identifying capacity issues and implementing effective strategies for water management. You may have overlooked the specific capacity gaps present in your territory, which are crucial for understanding challenges. Additionally, it seems there were no initiatives or reports related to creating water careers or promoting Diversity and Inclusion in your institutions, which greatly affects overall capacity. On a positive note, your engagement with the topic shows awareness of the importance of capacity in water governance. However, addressing these critical areas will be essential for improvement in the future.

Show example ▾

#### Financing

Your score of 0.5 indicates substantial gaps in financing aspects of water governance. Specifically, you missed crucial details regarding the financing mechanisms of River Basin Organisations, the presence of economic instruments, and funding targeted at vulnerable groups, all of which are vital for equitable water access. However, your scoring of 2 in the implementation of social tariffs for vulnerable users demonstrates a commendable effort to support these populations. Additionally, you acknowledged the

Figure 3: Example of results, including a spidergraph and AI summary from the Water Governance assessment tool

Along the findings, the report presents relevant European case studies to provide actionable insights for addressing the identified governance gaps. These case studies were mapped within the project in a so-called “Reference Guide for Programming” (Deliverable 2.2)

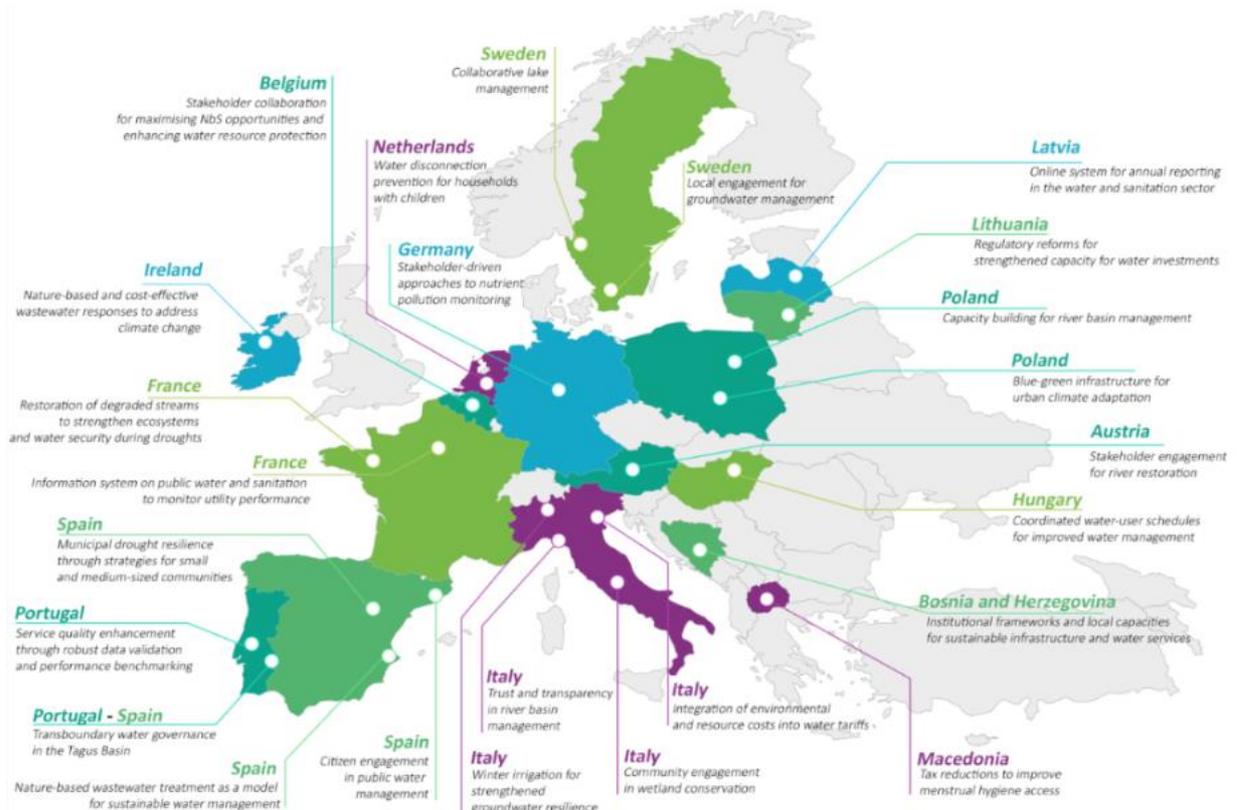


Figure 4: Governance and practice solutions mapped around Europe

The tool seeks to facilitate water governance assessment by water-related stakeholders with different backgrounds, belonging to different sectors (e.g., energy, food, environment) and with

different kinds of knowledge (e.g., water regulators, water associations, citizens). In this sense, this tool aimed to translate the theoretical contents and methodologies from the governance framework into a user-friendly interface to promote stakeholder involvement and facilitate discussions on governance gaps and challenges by a broader audience than technical actors.

The InnWater governance approach emphasizes participatory, visual, and discussion-based tools to make water governance more accessible and engaging for a wide range of stakeholders, including non-technical participants. Its inclusive design encourages involvement from diverse water-related institutions, including regulators and water associations, as well as sectors such as agriculture and the environment, and citizens. Visual tools like spider graphs and AI-generated reports help stakeholders quickly interpret governance performance and identify strengths and gaps. The use of European case studies provides actionable insights and connects theory to effective practices. Moreover, the InnWater framework seeks to align with EU policy priorities, including the Green Deal and the 2030 Biodiversity Agenda, by prioritizing sustainability and resilience and incorporating principles such as the circular economy and local empowerment. Ultimately, this approach aims to foster constructive dialogue and practical solutions to improve local water governance.

### Box 1. What this tool is – and what it is not

#### What the InnWater governance assessment tool is:

**Participatory and inclusive:** Designed for engagement across diverse stakeholders, including water regulators, local communities, citizens, and professionals from various sectors (e.g., energy, food, environment).

**Visual and accessible:** With visual tools like spider graphs and AI-generated reports to make governance assessments easy to interpret, even for non-technical actors.

**Actionable and practical:** Providing case studies and insights based on European best practices to help stakeholders translate governance gaps into real-world solutions.

#### What it is not:

**A one-size-fits-all solution:** The tool is designed to facilitate discussions and generate insights but requires local adaptation and input from stakeholders.

**A technical governance framework:** While it incorporates technical principles, the tool is not purely for experts but aims to engage a broader audience.

**A static assessment:** Rather than just an evaluation, it is an ongoing tool for facilitating dialogue, reflection, and action.

### 3. VALIDATING THE APPROACH: A THREE-STEP PROCESS

The validation process for the InnWater governance framework and assessment tool was carried out through a three-step approach. This process involved presenting, exploring, and consulting various aspects of the framework and tool with different audiences, each phase focusing on different dimensions to ensure feedback from diverse audiences and real-world applicability. The validation phases consisted of the following:

1. **Online Consultation with Water Governance Experts:** This phase involved a two-round Delphi questionnaire, conducted online with a select group of water governance experts. The consultation aimed to evaluate the overall structure and coherence of the framework, as well as its relevance to current challenges in water governance. Experts provided feedback on the framework's core elements, its alignment with principles of sustainability and resilience, and its capacity to address evolving water governance needs.
2. **A set of five structured consultations with potential user groups:** A series of five online focus groups were held, bringing together potential user groups from different sectors of water management across the EU. This phase sought to gather practical insights into how the governance framework and its associated tool could be applied across various sectors and scales. Participants were encouraged to assess the framework's utility in real-world settings and offer suggestions for enhancing its effectiveness and usability.
3. **Pilot site application and in-person workshops:** The framework was applied in the project's pilot sites through in-person workshops, offering a hands-on approach to testing the usability of the assessment tool in providing context-specific governance recommendations. These workshops served as a platform for discussing how to achieve good water governance within the pilot sites, using the framework as a guide. The goal was to understand how the tool can support water governance efforts on the ground, reflecting the needs and challenges of the specific regions.

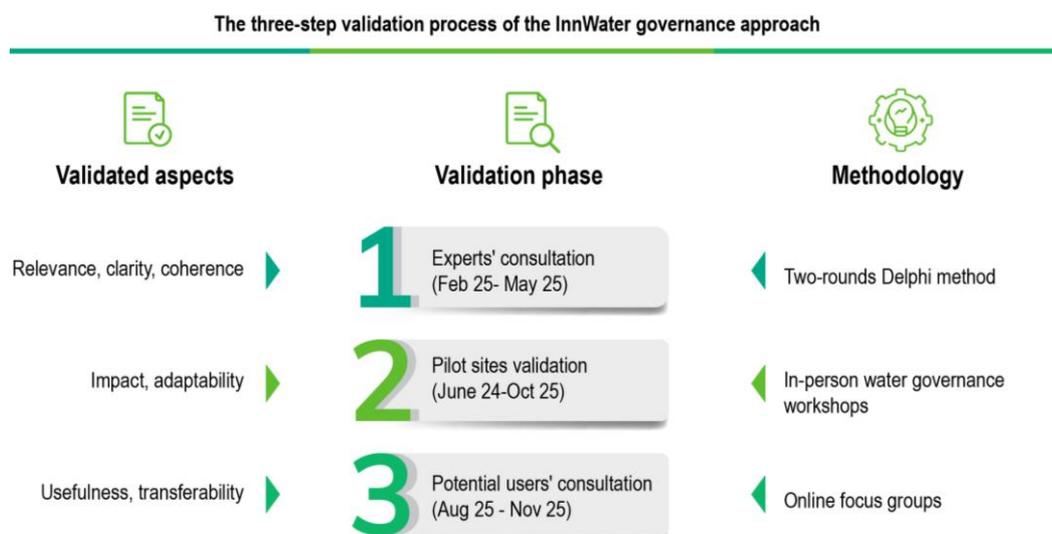


Figure 5: The three-step validation process of the InnWater governance approach

Once the three validation phases were completed, **a thematic analysis was conducted to synthesize the results**. Each phase was examined to identify key aspects explored during the validation process, with themes and subthemes emerging from the feedback. These themes formed the **key insights derived from the validation**, providing valuable guidance for water managers.

Finally, the identified themes and subthemes from **all three validation phases were grouped into policy-relevant insights and recommendations** for water managers. This clustering process helped to highlight how the InnWater governance approach can support water governance improvements in diverse contexts, where it can offer valuable tools, and where its limitations might need to be addressed in future applications.

### 3.1 Delphi Consultation with Water Governance experts

The first validation phase for the InnWater governance approach consisted of a **consultation designed to gather insights from water governance experts** around Europe on the framework's relevance, clarity, completeness, and coherence. This expert consultation used the widely recognized Delphi method, a structured approach for collecting opinions from a selected group of knowledgeable individuals through multiple rounds of questionnaires.

#### Who was involved?

The Delphi consultation brought together a diverse group of 12 water governance experts from across various sectors. These included academics, government officials, NGO representatives, and professionals from other institutions with substantial expertise in water governance. Experts were specifically chosen for their familiarity with governance frameworks, particularly those aligned with the OECD Principles on Water Governance, ensuring that their feedback would be valuable in shaping the framework's relevance to real-world water management challenges.

The selection process began with a call for nominations from InnWater project partners and the WG Synergy Group, who identified and recommended qualified individuals based on their experience. The consultation participants were confirmed and invited by email, with the goal of gathering their expert opinions on the framework's integration of new principles related to sustainability and resilience in water systems.

#### What was tested?

The main aim of the Delphi consultation **was to assess the relevance, clarity and coherence** of the InnWater governance assessment framework. The experts were asked to respond to a questionnaire focusing on several key areas:

- Review and improve the principles underpinning the sustainability and resilience dimensions of the water governance framework.
- Identify and elaborate on the factors that drive or hinder the implementation of these principles in water governance contexts.

#### Why this matters for water managers

The feedback collected from this consultation provided expert validation of the framework's design and its potential impact. Water managers are tasked with navigating complex governance environments, and a

framework that aligns with both global governance goals and local realities is crucial. The iterative nature of the Delphi consultation, where experts were given the opportunity to refine their opinions based on collective feedback, also adds reliability and consensus.

### 3.2 The InnWater framework in practice: pilot sites validation

The second phase of validation for the InnWater governance assessment framework involved **applying the tool at several pilot sites**, aiming to assess its real-world usability and impact on improving water governance. These pilot sites were selected to represent different water governance contexts, to providing insights into how the framework could support better water management practices across diverse regions.

The project pilot sites include a diverse range of regions and governance settings, each with its own set of challenges and needs. The pilot sites for the validation phase included:

- **Reunion Island (France):** an overseas island with unique governance and environmental challenges.
- **West Country (UK):** representing catchment partnerships and a more decentralized governance model.
- **Figueres (Catalonia, Spain):** a municipality with a focus on integrating biodiversity into water management.
- **Middle Brenta (Italy) and Middle Tisza (Hungary):** as examples of medium-sized river basins facing challenges such as drought and water scarcity.

The validation across pilot sites intended to cover a broad spectrum of governance models, from highly centralized systems to decentralized, catchment-based governance approaches. The pilot site leaders coordinated the workshops, engaged with local stakeholders, and were supported by other project members to test the framework and tool in real-world scenarios.



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## Servizio idrico del Bacino Brenta: prospettive e riflessioni con gli stakeholder

Workshop per la valutazione partecipata della governance del servizio promosso dal progetto Horizon Europe «InnWater»

Venerdì 28 marzo 2025 - ore 9:00  
Villa Rina - Via Riva del Grappa, 89, 35013 Cittadella (PD)

Programma:  
9:00 Registrazione  
9:30 Inizio lavori  
12:30 Chiusura lavori  
13:00 Momento conviviale

Per la partecipazione è obbligatorio dare conferma agli indirizzi mail [arsa\\_tecnica@consigliobacinobrenta.it](mailto:arsa_tecnica@consigliobacinobrenta.it) (e in cc [giacomo.laghetto@etfor.com](mailto:giacomo.laghetto@etfor.com)) indicando i nominativi delle persone presenti.

Evento organizzato da:

In collaborazione con:



Figure 6: Invitation to the governance workshop in the Middle Brenta pilot site

### What was tested?

The primary objective of the pilot sites validation was **to evaluate the usability and effectiveness** of the InnWater governance assessment tool in real-world settings. The focus was on how well the tool could identify governance gaps, improve coordination among stakeholders, and ultimately support more sustainable and resilient water governance practices. In each case, the tool was applied during participatory workshops, where local stakeholders discussed the current state of water governance, identified weaknesses, and explored potential solutions. The framework's effectiveness was assessed through interactive sessions, feedback from participants, and the analysis of results presented via spider diagrams and other tools that visually represented governance strengths and weaknesses.

**Workshop structures were tailored to each pilot's specific needs**, so the tool was tested across various contexts. The workshops' results were synthesized into summary reports that highlighted stakeholder opinions and the practical usefulness of the governance assessment tool. In **Reunion Island**, for example, the assessment was intended to serve as an initial basis to identify

governance gaps and initiate discussions about improving stakeholder engagement in the water management process. In **Figueres**, the tool was used to think how to integrate biodiversity into water management discussions, identifying which governance principles were most relevant for their local context. The **West Country** pilot emphasized how the tool could improve cross-sector coordination and foster dialogue between different governance levels, while in the **Middle Brenta** pilot, the tool was used to reflect on the governance pathway the area has gone through and which challenges lie ahead.

Table 1. Dates of the Governance workshops within the pilot sites

Workshop name	Location	Date	Main objective
Reunion Island Water Governance workshop	Reunion Island, France	June 10, 2024	To test the water governance assessment tool with local stakeholders and identify governance gaps on the island.
Governance live assessment: catchment partnerships and the InnWater assessment tool	Exeter, UK	September 25, 2024	To gather feedback from catchment partnership representatives and evaluate the enhanced governance assessment tool.
Participatory evaluation of the integrated water service's governance	Cittadella, Italy	March 28, 2025	To evaluate the participatory governance of the Brenta Basin water service and identify areas for improvement.
Strengthening water management and decision-support systems in the Middle Tisza	Szolnok, Hungary	October 29, 2025	To assess the water governance in the Middle Tisza River basin, focusing on drought and water scarcity challenges.
Governance of the natural, landscape, biodiversity and ecological values of the Muga River	Figueres, Spain	November 25, 2025	To integrate biodiversity into water management and assess governance frameworks in the Muga River basin.

### 3.3 Consultation with potential users across Europe

The third phase of the validation process involved structured consultations with potential users of the InnWater governance framework and assessment tool. These consultations were aimed at understanding how the tool could be applied in different real-world water governance contexts. The consultations were conducted as online focus groups, where participants were introduced to the framework and tool through presentations, followed by open-ended questions designed to capture live feedback.

The consultations included a broad range of stakeholders, predominantly water managers, including directors and associates from UK catchment partnerships, river basin authorities from Italy, and representatives from the French Biodiversity Agency and the Overseas Territories Directorate. Additionally, experts from academia, particularly those involved in the sister projects of InnWater (Govaqua and Retouch Nexus), were also engaged. These experts provided valuable insights into how the framework could be integrated into various water governance strategies across Europe.

Table 2. Details of the five structured consultations

Consultation	Participants	Objectives	Date
Feedback from project replicators	Individual experts from outside the project	To test the usability and relevance of the WG assessment tool in real-life contexts	May 2025
European River Basin Authorities	INBO conference attendees and ADBPO	How can this tool be useful for water management authorities?	October 17, 2025
Synergy Group Replication	Members from the sister projects of InnWater	How can this tool/framework support water resource strategies?	October 30, 2025
French Biodiversity Agency	Territorial Delegate, New Caledonia	How would this type of evaluation be useful in your overseas governance context?	November 28, 2025
UK Catchment Partnerships	Catchment partnership representatives and national government employees	How can the tool be useful for UK catchment partnerships in their goals?	December 10, 2025

The consultations followed a similar structure, but each was tailored to address specific aspects of the framework and tool based on the unique challenges of the participants' governance contexts:

- **River Basin Authorities:** This consultation, initially introduced in May 2025 during an INBO (International Network of Basin Organizations) event, focused on the tool's usability for water managers and planners. A follow-up session with the Po River Basin District Authority (ADBPO) further deepened the discussion, emphasizing the tool's practical application in river basin management.
- **Synergy Group consultation:** In this consultation, feedback from the project replicators was discussed, with a focus on the applicability of the framework. Participants also explored how the results from the InnWater project complemented or overlapped with findings from the Govaqua and Retouch Nexus projects.
- **UK Catchment partnerships:** This session centered on the framework's relevance for decentralized governance systems, such as the UK's catchment partnerships. It explored how the tool could be adapted to fit the specific needs of smaller, local governance structures.
- **French Biodiversity Agency:** The consultation with the French Biodiversity Agency concentrated on how the tool could be applied to complex, insular governance contexts, such as those found in France's overseas territories. The feedback was mostly on how the framework could address the unique governance challenges of islands and remote regions.

A final, more qualitative consultation was carried out with a group of **project replicators**. These replicators were tasked with using the InnWater governance assessment tool on areas outside of the project's pilot sites. They were asked to complete a feedback questionnaire, focusing on their user experience, data availability, the assessment process, and the tool's overall impact and usefulness.

## 4. WHAT WE LEARNED: KEY INSIGHTS FROM VALIDATION

This section presents **a synthesis of the key insights** that emerged from the thematic analysis of the three validation phases of the InnWater governance approach. The insights are grouped into six core themes, each of these highlighting findings that are directly relevant for improving water governance practices and enhancing the tool's effectiveness in real-world applications. These insights present main ideas from the framework validation process and also provide guidance for water managers seeking to adopt and implement the tool in their respective regions.

### 4.1 The framework's relevance and alignment with needs

Across validation phases, the InnWater governance framework and assessment tool were **recognized for their relevance, highlighting their alignment with global and local water governance priorities**. The tool's integration of sustainability and resilience, including climate resilience, is valued because it addresses global concerns like climate change, water scarcity, and biodiversity loss. The framework's attention to vulnerable groups is a strength, though more action is needed to ensure their genuine inclusion in decision-making.

The tool was considered aligned with established water governance principles, but **challenges remain in adapting** these to specific regional and local contexts. This demonstrates a further need for context-specific adaptations for effective implementation.

Main theme	Sub-theme	Key insights
Perceived relevance	Alignment with global and local priorities	The tool's alignment with global goals (e.g., sustainability, resilience) and local governance needs is critical. The addition of new dimensions, like climate resilience, enhances its relevance for future water governance.
	Incorporation of sustainability and resilience	The tool is highly valued for incorporating resilience and sustainability, responding to pressing concerns such as climate change, water scarcity, and biodiversity.
	Stakeholder and vulnerable group considerations	Consideration of vulnerable groups is a strength but requires action to ensure their real representation in the decision-making process.
Alignment of the framework and tool	Alignment with key water governance principles	The framework aligns well with established water governance principles, but challenges exist in adapting the principles to specific regional and local contexts.
	Applicability in different contexts	The tool's flexibility is its strength, but it must be adapted to reflect the unique needs and challenges of diverse regions, such as New Caledonia or the UK's bottom-up approach.

#### Implications for Water Managers:

- Water managers must consider local contexts when adopting frameworks and tools, ensuring that they align with both global water governance objectives and local needs (e.g., climate resilience, stakeholder inclusivity).

- Adaptations may be needed when applying the framework to diverse governance models (e.g., centralized vs. decentralized systems).

## 4.2 The tools usability for water practitioners

Another insight concerns the usability of the InnWater framework and assessment tool from the perspective of water practitioners, particularly in real-world governance settings. Overall, **the tool is valued for its ability to stimulate solution-oriented discussions**, helping practitioners identify key governance gaps and prioritise areas for improvement. As said by one of the potential user groups “fragmented governance systems are a challenge across Europe. This tool could help in identifying these gaps and find ways to address them”.

At the same time, despite being considered conceptually robust, validation feedback highlights several limitations, including **the need for clearer definitions, a more intuitive structure, and more action-oriented guidance** to better support non-expert users. Practitioners also stressed that concrete, step-by-step guidelines and measurable metrics would be convenient to ensure the framework can be used as a truly operational tool rather than remaining largely analytical.

Main theme	Sub-theme	Key insights
Clarity of the framework for external experts	Conceptual clarity and definition of principles	While the framework is conceptually sound, it needs to be more user-friendly, with clear definitions and action-oriented guidelines for practical application.
	Clarity of actionable guidelines and metrics	Water managers need clearer, more actionable guidelines and metrics to apply the framework in practice.
Actionable solutions and practical tools for governance improvement	Solution-oriented discussions	The tool enables practical discussions about water governance improvement. By identifying key gaps and weaknesses, it helps focus efforts where they are most needed.
	Concrete action plans for governance improvement	The tool has led to the development of concrete action plans and is a valuable resource for generating tangible improvements in governance.

### Implications for Water Managers:

- Water managers should ensure that any assessment tool or framework adopted is practical, clear, and provides actionable steps.
- The tool should not only diagnose governance issues but also lead to clear and feasible solutions and improvements.

## 4.3 Turning governance assessment into stakeholder dialogue

This insight **highlights the role of the InnWater framework and assessment tool in making governance assessment a structured and inclusive stakeholder dialogue**. Validation results show the tool fosters engagement across many actors by creating a shared space for dialogue and collaboration, promoting diverse perspectives are acknowledged in water governance. By clarifying roles, responsibilities, and influence, the tool improves coordination among stakeholders and helps water managers navigate complex actor landscapes. Its relevance is clear

in fragmented governance systems, where the framework brings together institutions and stakeholders that might otherwise operate in isolation.

Main theme	Sub-theme	Key insights
Increased stakeholder engagement and inclusivity	Inclusive dialogue and collaboration	The tool promotes inclusivity by fostering dialogue across stakeholder groups, ensuring diverse voices are heard in water governance.
	Improved stakeholder coordination	Improved coordination between stakeholders is a key outcome. The tool helped water managers better understand the role and influence of each stakeholder.
Practitioner feedback across governance contexts	UK's bottom-up approach	The tool helps promoting high-level dialogues within bottom-up approaches like the UK's catchment partnerships, but it's hard to apply in smaller-than-national levels.
	Italian River Basin Authorities	In Italy, the tool's alignment with centralized governance is useful, but requires adaptation to local governance structures.

#### Implications for Water Managers:

- The tool can be a powerful resource for improving stakeholder engagement, especially in fragmented systems.
- It is essential to ensure inclusivity and representation of all relevant actors, particularly vulnerable groups, in the water governance process.
- The tool helps facilitate better coordination among stakeholders and provides a common platform for dialogue.

## 4.4 From governance gaps to capacity building

The contribution of the InnWater framework and assessment tool **to identify governance gaps and translate them into concrete capacity-building needs** was generally appreciated across consultations. Validation results show that the tool is effective in making governance weaknesses visible, especially in areas such as cross-sector coordination and interactions across governance levels. Highlighting these weaknesses supports a more focused and strategic approach to governance improvement, allowing practitioners to prioritise actions where they are most needed. Beyond diagnosis, the tool also draws attention to underlying institutional capacity constraints, including gaps in skills, staffing, training, and knowledge-sharing.

Main theme	Sub-theme	Key insights
Identification of governance gaps and weaknesses	Highlighting governance weaknesses	The tool has been effective in highlighting governance weaknesses and areas needing improvement, particularly in cross-sector coordination.
	Focused improvement areas	By identifying areas of weakness, the tool enables targeted improvements in governance.
Strengthened institutional capacity	Institutional capacity building	The tool has highlighted the need for institutional capacity-building, particularly in terms of training, staffing, and knowledge-sharing.
	Sustainable funding and investment	Funding is a key issue identified by the tool, with implications for ensuring the sustainability of water governance systems.

### Implications for Water Managers:

- Water managers should focus on addressing identified governance weaknesses and gaps, especially in coordination across different levels of governance.
- Capacity building in institutions is crucial for effective water governance, especially in areas like training and staffing.

## 4.5 Barriers to adoption of the InnWater governance approach

This insight examines **the conditions and constraints influencing the adoption of the InnWater governance framework and assessment tool** in practice. Validation feedback indicates a clear interest and willingness among practitioners to use the tool, reflecting its perceived value and relevance for addressing water governance challenges. However, this interest is accompanied by concerns related to the tool's complexity, the time and resources required for its effective implementation, and the perceived subjectivity inherent in qualitative governance assessments.

**These challenges are more pronounced in fragmented governance systems**, where multiple stakeholders and governance levels complicate coordination and application. The insight highlights that while uptake potential is high, successful adoption will depend on addressing practical implementation barriers and supporting users in applying the tool efficiently and consistently across diverse governance contexts.

Main theme	Sub-theme	Key insights
Interest in adopting the framework and tool	Willingness to adopt the tool	There is a general interest in adopting the tool, but some concerns about its complexity and the resources required to implement it effectively.
	Barriers to adoption	The main barriers to adoption include the tool's complexity, the time required for implementation, and concerns about the subjectivity of the assessment.
Challenges in application	Governance in fragmented systems	Adapting the tool to fragmented governance systems remains a challenge, especially in contexts with multiple stakeholders and diverse governance levels.

### Implications for Water Managers:

- While interest in the tool is high, concerns about its complexity and ensure it is easy to implement should be addressed.
- The resource demand and time required to use the tool effectively should be considered when planning its adoption.
- Water managers should be prepared to address the subjectivity of the tool and ensure that the results are meaningful across diverse contexts.

## 4.6 Advancing long-term resilience and sustainability in water management

A final insight emerged about the role of the InnWater framework and assessment tool in advancing climate resilience and long-term sustainability in water governance. Validation results show **the tool emphasizes climate resilience, potentially helping water managers identify gaps in adaptation strategies**, including preparedness for climate-related risks like floods and droughts.

The framework is said to support more proactive and forward-looking governance and encourage a shift from short-term, reactive decisions to long-term planning, embedding sustainability and resilience as core elements of governance. **This could help water managers anticipate future pressures** and design governance arrangements better equipped to handle uncertainty and long-term environmental change.

Main theme	Sub-theme	Key insights
Climate resilience and sustainability	Adapting to Climate Change	Climate resilience is a priority in the tool, and it has helped identify gaps in adaptation strategies for climate change, such as preparedness for floods and droughts.
	Building long-term sustainability	The tool encourages water managers to think long-term and integrate sustainability and resilience into governance frameworks to prepare for future challenges.

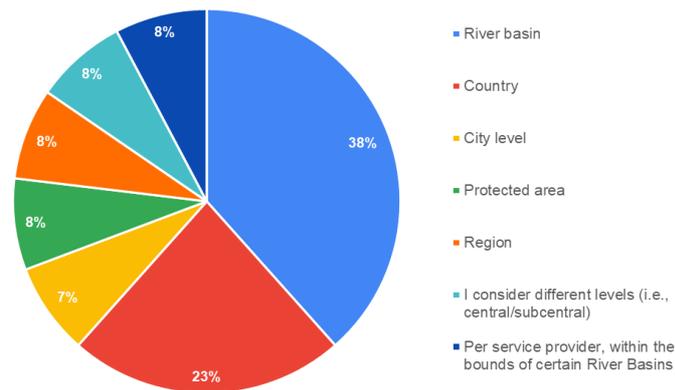
### Implications for Water Managers:

- Water managers should prioritize climate resilience in their water governance frameworks to address future water-related risks.
- Long-term sustainability must be embedded in water governance planning, particularly with regard to adapting to climate change.

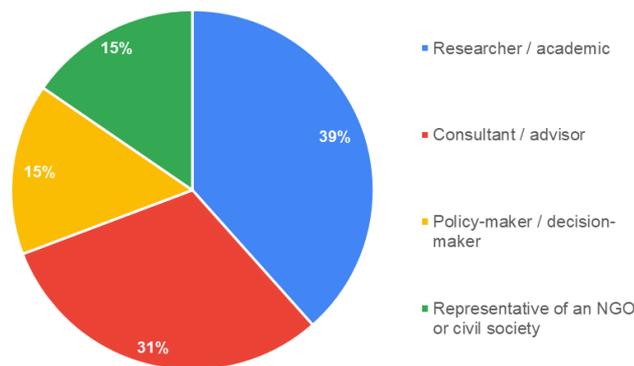
### Box 2. Feedback on the InnWater governance assessment tool from replicators across Europe

One of the consultations with potential users to validate the InnWater Governance approach was **conducted with external professionals to the project, called the InnWater “replicators”**. The replication activity’s objective was to facilitate the application of InnWater results in new locations by testing the tool in diverse governance contexts. To this end, the replicators used the Water Governance Assessment tool (WGA) to assess water systems in fourteen locations throughout Europe, based on the 16 governance principles from the InnWater framework. This replication activity covered scales that ranged from sub-basin and regional levels to national systems. Once they conducted the governance assessment using the WGA tool, replicators were asked to complete **an online survey** through which they provided feedback on the tool’s usability, content, and overall usefulness.

In terms of application level, **the tool was used at multiple governance levels** (figure below). Over half of the experts (54%) applied the tool at the basin or regional level, including protected areas. Another 23% assessed water governance at the national level, while 7% focused on municipal or city-level governance. The remaining 16% used the tool to analyse multiple scales simultaneously or applied it to specific service providers without specifying a geographic level. This diversity of use provided initial insights into the tool’s versatility, although it also raised some challenges related to the consistency of questions across scales.



When asked about the aspects they found most useful, the experts frequently mentioned the **output format and visualization** of the tool, with special mention to the results section which “was very impressive with the spider chart and the AI assistant” and effective in summarising governance strengths and weaknesses. Another frequently mentioned aspect was the **structure and user interface** of the questionnaire, with its different sections, which helped them organize the data and knowledge, summarizing complex subjects of water management. Many highlighted the **breadth and depth of the questions**, noting that the tool encouraged reflection from multiple angles and often required evidence-based responses. Finally, they valued **the tool's Practical guidance and usefulness for action**, highlighting its ability to connect assessment results with concrete recommendations and examples of governance improvements.



Despite the generally positive feedback, experts also identified several limitations. A first group of issues related to **technical and usability aspects**, including the time and level of prior knowledge required to complete the assessment. Others pointed to the **rigidity of the question-and-answer format**, explaining that some closed-ended questions did not always allow them to fully represent the complexity of governance situations in their specific contexts. Another frequent observation concerned **conceptual and scope-related difficulties**.

Some experts encountered questions that seemed better suited for higher levels of governance, such as regions or basins, when their assessment focused on smaller areas like municipalities. This misalignment between question scope and assessment level reflects a broader challenge inherent to cross-scale governance analysis, where principles such as coordination, participation, and regulatory capacity manifest differently at different scales. Finally, a few participants mentioned **language and contextual adaptation issues**, including translation inconsistencies or technical bugs when using versions of the tool other than English.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WATER MANAGERS

Based on the main insights emerged during the validation process of the enhanced InnWater framework and associated tool, some actionable recommendations for water managers to improve water governance are proposed. These recommendations are structured around practical use cases, focusing on areas where the tool can have the most impact. Each recommendation is backed by insights from the validation process, with references to specific feedback from the pilot sites and expert validation.

### 1. Foster stakeholder engagement and enhance coordination across governance scales

**Recommendation:** Use the tool to foster inclusive stakeholder dialogues and improve coordination between different governance levels.

The water governance assessment tool can be a powerful tool for engaging diverse stakeholders in water governance discussions. Water managers should leverage the tool to bring together various actors, including water managers, local communities, and vulnerable groups, to engage in structured dialogues about governance challenges. The tool can help identify governance gaps and prompt constructive discussions on how to address them. Furthermore, the tool should be used to assess governance across multiple levels, being more effective at the national level. Water managers should use the tool to identify coordination issues between these levels and address discrepancies in policy implementation.

### 2. Focus on Governance capacity building and resource allocation

**Recommendation:** Leverage the tool to identify capacity gaps and create action plans for capacity building.

The tool can provide valuable insights into governance weaknesses, especially around institutional capacity and staff expertise. Water managers could use the tool to assess these gaps and develop targeted capacity-building strategies. This may include increasing staff training, securing sustainable funding mechanisms, or addressing resource allocation issues in local and regional water governance. In particular, developing clearer roles and responsibilities across stakeholders is critical to improving governance performance.

In validation with expert users and pilot sites, the tool was seen as effective for identifying key areas of weakness, particularly in capacity and funding. One example from the UK highlighted how different catchment partnerships faced varying challenges due to resource disparities, underlining the need for tailored capacity-building plans.

### 3. Enhance climate resilience by integrating adaptive strategies

**Recommendation:** Use the tool to assess and improve water systems' resilience to climate change.

Climate resilience has become a critical priority in water governance. The water governance assessment tool allows water managers to assess how well current governance structures are equipped to handle climate shocks, such as flooding and drought. Moreover, the tool could help realize water managers whether they are considering climate resilience at all within their management instruments. By using the tool to assess environmental resilience, water managers can identify gaps in preparedness and create strategies to enhance the adaptive capacity of water systems.

#### 4. Keep the tool's use simple and tailored to the context for broader relevance and accessibility

**Recommendation:** The InnWater governance framework and the assessment tool are useful instruments, but they should be adapted to local governance contexts and streamlined to make them more accessible for all stakeholders.

To ensure that the tool remains relevant and effective across various governance models, water managers should adapt it to reflect the unique challenges and structures of different regions. For instance, in decentralized systems like the UK's catchment partnerships, the tool could be of guidance to promote structured discussions around standard comparisons between catchment partnerships. On the other hand, in more centralized systems like those in Italy, the tool could provide an easy-to-read diagnosis to River Basin Authorities and make it transmittable to a broad audience of stakeholders.

Feedback from the UK pilot site highlighted the need for more localized adaptations to reflect decentralized systems. Additionally, experts and participants emphasized the challenge of using the tool due to its complexity, suggesting that a streamlined version with clearer guidance would increase engagement and usability.

#### Box 3. Use of the InnWater governance framework and assessment tool in the Middle Brenta pilot

In the Middle Brenta pilot site, the InnWater governance framework and its associated assessment tool were applied through a **participatory workshop**, designed to test the tool's relevance and usability, while supporting stakeholder dialogue about governance improvement pathways for the area. The process began with a **preliminary application of the governance assessment tool** by the pilot site leaders (Consiglio di Bacino Brenta, with the support of Etifor | Valuing Nature). The pilot site leaders applied the tool in advance of the workshop to generate an initial governance assessment of the Middle Brenta River Basin based on the 16 InnWater governance principles.

During the workshop, participants were introduced to the InnWater project, the OECD water governance principles, and the rationale for the enhanced governance framework. The results of the pre-filled governance assessment were then shared with participants to establish a **common evidence base** and allow all stakeholders—regardless of technical background—to engage with the same set of governance dimensions.

The core of the pilot consisted of a **facilitated participatory exercise** centered on the 16 governance principles. Rather than asking participants to complete the questionnaire themselves, the tool was used as a **catalyst for reflection**, structuring discussions around three key dimensions: governance strengths, governance gaps, and possible solutions. To identify **governance strengths**, participants were invited to physically move within the room and select the governance principle they perceived as most “solid” at the local level. Working in small groups, they explained and justified their choices, drawing on their own experience and institutional perspectives.



The discussion then shifted to **governance weaknesses and gaps**, structured around the four overarching dimensions of the governance framework: efficacy, efficiency, trust and engagement, and sustainability and resilience. Participants self-organized into subgroups according to their interest in these categories. Within each subgroup, they **collectively identified up to three principles representing high weaknesses**, and for each of those, they discussed the underlying governance problems and proposed potential solutions to address them. The outcomes of these subgroup discussions were subsequently shared in a plenary session using the “fishbowl” technique, to seek an inclusive and dynamic exchange among participants.



Throughout the workshop, the governance framework played a key role in **bringing structure and clarity to discussions** that might otherwise have remained fragmented or abstract. The tool helped participants articulate issues, recognize interdependencies between governance dimensions, and move from problem identification to solution-oriented thinking, anchoring the dialogue in clearly defined principles. The InnWater governance assessment tool was used less as a measurement instrument and more as a **dialogue-enabling and boundary object** in the Middle Brenta pilot, proving effective in engaging a diverse range of stakeholders, including both technical and non-technical actors.

Participants **widely appreciated the approach**, recognizing its value in creating a shared language around water governance and in building communication bridges among actors who do not routinely interact. The pilot supported the tool's potential as a practical mechanism for supporting inclusive, structured, and solution-oriented governance discussions at the river basin level.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

This document presented the **validation process for the InnWater governance approach**, which includes the project's enhanced governance framework and assessment tool. The validation was carried out through a three-step process: an expert consultation, five workshops at pilot sites, and five focus group discussions with potential users. These steps provided valuable insights into various aspects of the framework and tool. The **key findings from this process have been synthesized** and presented in a way that makes them actionable for future water management, aiming to enhance the resilience and sustainability of water systems by promoting participation and identifying governance gaps.

The validation process has provided valuable insights into the relevance, applicability, and practical use of the water governance framework and tool. Across consultations and on-site workshops, the following key themes and insights emerged:

- **Framework's relevance and alignment with needs:** The InnWater framework was deemed highly relevant by aligning closely with current governance and sustainability needs. Its new principles focusing on resilience, long-term sustainability, and the integration of participatory approaches rendered the framework current and appropriate for current water governance challenges.
- **The tools usability for water practitioners:** The tool was highly appreciated by those who used it (i.e., pilot site leaders and replicators), with users highlighting its clarity and the way it connected governance gap diagnostics with case studies, which served as inspiration for addressing these gaps.
- **Turning governance assessment into stakeholder dialogue:** Validation results suggest that the governance assessment tool effectively promoted engagement among a potentially wide range of actors, creating a shared space for dialogue and collaboration.
- **Governance gaps to capacity building:** The tool was generally appreciated for making governance weaknesses visible, particularly in areas like cross-sector coordination and interactions between governance levels. The identification of these gaps enabled a more focused and strategic approach to improving governance, helping practitioners prioritize actions where they are most needed.
- **Advancing long-term resilience and sustainability in water management:** The validation results suggested that the InnWater tool places a strong emphasis on climate resilience, potentially helping water managers identify gaps in adaptation strategies, particularly in preparedness for climate-related risks such as floods and droughts

The findings from the validation process suggest several key areas where water managers can focus their efforts, including **promoting inclusive dialogue** and coordination among stakeholders, using the assessment tool to bridge gaps between various actors, seeking that all relevant voices, especially those of vulnerable groups, are represented in decision-making processes. In addition, water managers can use the tool to **highlight key governance gaps**, which can help in the planning process and to strengthen institutional capacity through enhanced resources and skill development. Furthermore, the governance framework explicitly addresses the importance of **planning for climate resilience** by highlighting weaknesses in adaptation strategies, allowing water managers to prioritize the long-term sustainability of water systems in the face of climate change. Finally, while the assessment tool is aligned with global governance principles, its

effectiveness relies on **adapting it to local contexts**. Water managers should customize the framework to fit regional governance models, whether centralized or decentralized, ensuring it addresses specific local challenges and needs.

Looking ahead, there are several areas for further improvement and expansion of the tool. First, **continued testing** in diverse governance settings is ideal to refine its functionality and enhance its relevance across different contexts and beyond InnWater's life cycle. Additionally, the tool can be further **simplified and improved** to continue seeking that non-technical stakeholders, including citizens and vulnerable groups, can effectively engage with it. This will make the framework easier to implement, especially in settings with limited technical expertise, and broaden its applicability in a range of governance environments.

The framework and tool represent a significant step toward improving water governance at local, regional, and global levels. With them, the InnWater governance approach expects to offer a practical approach to addressing the complex challenges of water management, particularly in an era of climate change and growing stakeholder demands. Promoting inclusivity, enhancing coordination, and focusing on sustainability, are some of the main highlights of this approach, thought to empower water managers to create more resilient, adaptive, and integrated water governance systems.

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