



**Local & Regional  
Europe**

# Water resilience

**Enhancing sustainability and adaptation  
through effective governance and cooperation  
with municipalities and regions**

**CEMR key messages on the future EU water resilience strategy**

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**Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)**

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## CEMR key messages

- 1) Water as a public good: CEMR call for enforcing legal frameworks that safeguard water as a public good, preventing its commodification and ensuring social equity and universal access.
- 2) Place-based policies: Identifying region-specific solutions integrating urban planning, water management and nature-based aspects that address the unique challenges of each area, from droughts to floods
- 3) Increasing funding: Ensure financial support for climate adaptation including water infrastructure projects, implementation of EU water legislations and emergency measures.
- 4) Reinforce multi-level governance mechanisms: Involve all levels of governance and stakeholders to raise awareness, design and implement water resilience strategies and ensure urban-rural interdependences

## Background

Access to water is a fundamental right and a public good. The access to affordable and high-quality drinking water for all EU citizens must be a core objective of future EU initiatives. As Europe faces the challenges of climate change and demographic changes leading to urbanization and depopulation, the resilience of our water systems is increasingly critical. The European Commission's upcoming Water Resilience Strategy must pay particular attention to local and regional governments, ensuring they have the tools and support needed to manage efficiently this essential resource.

We welcome the Commission's plan to map the risks and preparedness needs in urban and rural areas to prepare a new European Water Resilience Strategy, as announced in the EC guidelines for 2024-2029. Its implementation, in alignment with already ongoing revision of EU water directives, presents both significant challenges and opportunities for municipalities and regions. An inclusive stakeholder approach is essential to secure broad support from business and civil society in the local climate adaptation strategies, including water resilience initiatives.

While upgrading water infrastructure, adopting smart technologies and implementing adaptation plans including nature-based solutions is financially and logistically demanding, the potential access to EU funding and innovative investment solutions offers a pathway to enhanced water security and sustainability.

The EU must ensure that the upcoming European Water Resilience Strategy includes clear guidelines and support mechanisms for local and regional governments. The strategy should focus on both

upgrading infrastructure for a more effective water management and promoting innovative, smart resilience solutions integrating water issues in broader urban planning policies, with an emphasis on securing funding opportunities for municipalities and regions.

CEMR calls on the EU to take decisive action in enhancing water resilience across Europe. By adopting these recommendations, the EU can ensure that water management systems are robust, adaptive, and capable of meeting the challenges posed by climate change and urbanization, thereby securing a sustainable future for all.

## 1. Water as a public good

Access to water is a fundamental human right, and water must not be commodified. Public sector management of water resources ensures direct accountability to citizens, fosters transparency, and promotes long-term investments with reduced transaction costs. This approach not only enhances trust but also supports sustainable water management practices that prioritize public welfare over profit.

The remunicipalisation of water services in cities like Paris and Berlin demonstrates the benefits of restoring public control over water management. After facing rising prices and deteriorating service quality under private operators, both cities opted to bring water services back under municipal control. The results were significant: Paris experienced a 5-8% reduction in water tariffs within the first year, while Berlin saw improved service quality and reinvestment in infrastructure<sup>1</sup>.

We therefore call the EU decision makers to:

- Implement robust legal frameworks to safeguard water and wastewater as a public good, ensuring that access to clean water is guaranteed for all.
- Strengthen support for public sector water services by facilitating funding and technical assistance to municipalities to prioritize transparency, accountability, and sustainable water management

## 2. Place-based policies

Water management issues vary significantly across Europe, with some regions facing severe droughts, while others struggle with frequent flooding. For instance, Southern Europe experiences recurring water

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<sup>1</sup> [Water remunicipalisation in Berlin and Paris: Specific processes and common challenges](#)

scarcity due to climate change, while Northern and Central Europe see more frequent and intense rainfalls and floodings. Addressing these diverse challenges requires region-specific strategies that reflect local realities and respond to the needs of all territories – from smaller municipalities and rural regions to densely urbanised regions.

These local strategies should notably define comprehensive and robust emergency plans for water-related events, that empower local governments and communities to act swiftly during water-related crises. These plans should include public awareness campaigns, early warning systems, evacuation protocols tailored to local risk profiles.

Effective water management goes beyond infrastructure; it involves addressing the interconnected environmental, societal, and economic factors that influence water use and availability. For example, integrated water resource management (IWRM) approaches developed by the UN have shown success in aligning policy objectives across sectors, from agriculture to urban planning<sup>2</sup>.

A one-size-fits-all approach cannot address the varied water management needs of different regions. Local governments, as the closest level to implementation, understand the specific challenges of their communities and can design policies that better reflect these needs.

Nature-based solutions, such as wetland restoration and green infrastructure, not only enhance water resilience but also deliver broader environmental benefits, including biodiversity support and carbon sequestration. For example, Ghent's initiatives in restoring natural habitats within the city exemplify how integrating nature can contribute to adapt to climate impacts while enhancing urban living conditions<sup>3</sup>.

Water management's challenges in the EU requires place-based solutions. We therefore call the EU decision makers to:

- Promote and fund water management solutions tailored to regional needs, recognizing the unique environmental and socio-economic contexts across Europe. This includes investing in research and innovation and capacity building focusing on localized solutions, such as drought-resistant crops in arid regions or improved drainage systems in flood-prone areas.
- Revise existing directives to foster a holistic approach that includes environmental sustainability, social equity, and resilient infrastructure.

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<sup>2</sup> [Integrated water resources management, UNEP](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Urban Green, Ghent, Belgium](#)

- Emphasize resilience and adaptation by ensuring water policies are flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances
- Provide the legal flexibility needed for place-based water policies, empowering local authorities to tailor solutions that fit their specific circumstances while aligning with broader regional and national frameworks. This will allow for more adaptive and responsive water governance.
- Prioritize the inclusion of nature-based solutions within climate adaptation strategies, ensuring adequate funding and technical support for local governments to implement these initiatives.

### 3. Increased funding

As highlighted in CEMR *'Local Green Transition'* study, insufficient financial resource remain the most pressing challenge for LRGs to implement green legislations<sup>4</sup>.

Aging water infrastructure and increased climate-related risks indeed poses significant risks to public health and safety, environmental sustainability, and climate resilience. However, many municipalities, particularly smaller ones, lack the necessary resources to effectively implement ensure compliance with existing water-related legislation. For instance, the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive requires substantial investments in infrastructure and technology, which is a considerable burden for local governments without adequate funding support.

We therefore call for the EU decision makers to:

- Provide targeted financial and technical assistance to municipalities to facilitate compliance with water-related legislations, considering the interlinkages and synergies between the different pieces of legislation on adaptation, land use and urban planning policies.
- Increase funding for water infrastructure projects, prioritizing on the one hand the upgrade of aging systems and the integration of innovative technologies to enhance water management efficiency and effective infrastructure monitoring (such as digital pipe information system) and on the other side the development of comprehensive climate adaptation plans.

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<sup>4</sup> *Local Green Transition: Prospects for an inclusive and competitive deal*, CEMR study, October 2024 (p.31)

- Simplify access to EU emergency funds for municipalities and regions affected by severe water-related events, ensuring they can mobilize rapid response and recovery efforts to protect residents and critical infrastructure

## 4. Multi-level governance

Effective water management necessitates collaboration among a diverse range of stakeholders, including local and regional governments, private sector entities, civil society, and community organizations. Establishing robust multi-level governance mechanisms is crucial to coordinate these actors and develop inclusive water management strategies that consider varying perspectives and needs. This governance structure should enable local governments to raise awareness and take proactive action and secure financing to build resilience strategy acting both on preventing and responding to water-related events.

CEMR welcomes initiatives such as the Urban Agenda's new partnership on water-sensitive cities, which aims to catalyse broad cooperation among stakeholders across all levels of governance. This partnership will serve as a platform for knowledge sharing, best practices, and collaborative problem-solving.

Urban water systems are intricately connected to broader catchment areas, where intensive urban development can affect natural water systems, adversely impacting surrounding regions. Conversely, urban water management relies on the sustainable management of peri-urban and rural areas for drinking water supply. Additionally, competition for water resources from agriculture, energy production, and floodwater management further complicates this relationship.

To enhance water resilience, effective governance mechanisms must address these interdependencies between water systems, nature and land use, ensuring that water management policies reflect the interconnectedness of these systems.

We need to recognize the interconnected nature of urban and rural water systems and promote cooperation at all levels of governance. We therefore call for the EU decision makers to:

- Develop governance frameworks that facilitate cooperation and resource-sharing between urban centres and their surrounding rural areas by creating integrated water management policies that acknowledge and leverage the interdependencies between urban and rural water systems and promote sustainable practices that benefit both communities.

- Reinforce multi-level governance mechanisms by creating platforms that facilitate collaboration between different level of governance – including cross-border cooperation, private sector entities, and civil society on water resilience.

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## About CEMR

The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) is the broadest association of local and regional governments in Europe. Its members are 60 national associations of municipalities and regions from 40 European countries. Together these associations represent some 115,000 local and regional governments.

CEMR's objectives are twofold: to influence European legislation on behalf of local and regional elected representatives, and to provide a platform for exchange between its member associations and their elected officials and experts.

Moreover, CEMR is the European section of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the worldwide organisation of local government.