



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION
OF PUBLIC WATER OPERATORS

A MANIFESTO FOR WATER

Water is the source of all life, an essential element for people and societies. It is also a finite resource which needs to be managed and used responsibly and sustainably.

As a common resource, water is shared by all of us and with future generations, which means that a long-term vision is paramount.

Water operators are key actors : they manage water resources, supply clean drinking water and treat used water to finally return it to nature. They are central in their local social, environmental and economic ecosystems.

European public water operators have in common a set of values and missions to provide the best possible services to their communities: well-performing water management, citizen-oriented, participative and affordable services, sustainable and long-term looking practices.

Their on-the-ground daily work needs to be complemented by strong commitments from policy makers to secure regulatory frameworks that support public water operators in fulfilling their mission in the public interest.

For this reason, Aqua Publica Europa calls EU decision-makers to commit to **making water a priority by upholding three key principles in the next years:**

- 1. WATER FOR THE PEOPLE : Guarantee safe, accessible and affordable water for all**
- 2. ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION: A sustainable approach to protect finite resources and face climate change**
- 3. EXCELLENCE IN WATER MANAGEMENT: Support efficient, forward-looking water management contributing to sustainable economies**

WHO WE ARE

Aqua Publica Europa is the European Association of Public Water Operators. Created in 2009, it unites publicly-owned water and sanitation services and other stakeholders working to promote public water management at European and international levels. Aqua Publica gathers over 60 members **servicing more than 70 million people in Europe**, in an operator-led association that looks for **efficient solutions that serve the public rather than corporate interests**.



Because water is essential to the existence of our entire societies, the way that it is managed plays a key role in socio-economic development. It is therefore paramount to **put people at the centre of decisions**.

Water and access to it are **already established priorities** at international level, notably with the UN's sixth [Sustainable Development Goal](#): 'clean water and sanitation', and for Europeans, who called for the EU to recognise access to water as a right with the **first-ever successful citizens' initiative** (ECI), [Right2Water](#), which gathered close to 2 million signatures.

At the moment, **access to safe drinking water in the European Union and in the world remains incomplete**. In Europe, [about 14 million people still lack access to a basic drinking-water source](#). At the same time, **citizens' trust in tap water needs to be consolidated**, which requires that they have an actual say in the management of their water. Working for the people means providing **transparent and participative services**.

Tap water in Europe is not only safe but also a more environmentally sustainable and affordable option for drinking water. Public water operators are conscious of this public interest of widespread consumption of tap water - in the EU, [tap water costs about €0.002 per litre](#) - and therefore **dedicate significant efforts to promote its drinking**; they are also committed to [tackling water poverty](#) whilst aligning with legal obligations for full cost-recovery.

The EU can support these actions and put its citizens at the centre of its water policies to guarantee a system where drinking tap water is safe, affordable, accessible everywhere in Europe.

Aqua Publica Europea's founding charter spells out that "water, the source of all life, constitutes a fundamental, inalienable, universal and imprescriptible right", **we call the EU to support this vision by:**

- **Adopting the Drinking Water Directive swiftly** (*Proposal for the recast of the Directive on the quality of water intended for human consumption - [2017/0332](#)*) to contribute to citizens' trust in tap water by setting updated quality standards, increasing access to water and transparency, and to boost consumption to the benefit of the entire society.
- **Committing to an ambitious international cooperation policy that relies on and supports not-for-profit partnerships** between EU and third-country operators to facilitate the realisation of the global right to water.
- **Supporting the creation of a European observatory on water poverty**, a multi-stakeholder platform to develop indicators and methodologies to assess water affordability in Europe, identify obstacles, and to work to balance affordability, cost-recovery and efficiency; and **fostering an improved access to water in Europe and supporting voluntary initiatives that contribute to this objective** (such as the deployment of public water points or the provision of free tap water in hospitality establishments).
- **Continuing to recognise the unique character of water: a common good that does not respond to market dynamics**, as it is both necessary to human survival and a natural monopoly with shared benefits.



Water is a **finite resource that is shared by all users**, which means that it needs to be cared for and managed responsibly, in a coordinated manner **between all of society's actors** to ensure a **fair distribution of resources**, the **preservation of water's natural state** and to **guarantee a sustainable future**.

The EU environmental policy is widely recognised as the most advanced in the world, **especially with the ambitious environmental water legislation set by the Water Framework Directive** ([Directive 2000/60/EC](#) of 23 October 2000 establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water policy). Yet, the European Environmental Agency, in its report '[European waters - Assessment of status and pressures 2018](#)', found that **less than half of European water bodies reach the required 'good status'**.

Human activity has strong implications on the quality and availability of water. Whilst public water operators are fully committed to treating polluted water according to high quality standards, the best option remains to **prevent damaging the natural quality of water**. This fact is already acknowledged in legislation, notably through the 'polluter-pays' principle. However, **fragmented governance hinders implementation** and risks leading to unbalanced transfer of treatment costs to households.

As the European Commission has launched a wide review of its water policy, it is crucial to consider the importance of established strong principles that require implementation.

New challenges are also emerging: from **climate change** and extreme events such as floods and droughts, to **demographic shifts** that affect the availability of water. Today, [water scarcity affects at least 11 % of the European population](#). These elements call for **new approaches to water management that fully take into account long-term perspectives**.

Aqua Publica Europea calls the EU to guarantee a long-term approach to water management by:

- **Ensuring strong environmental standards for the protection of water's natural quality and quantity and preventing pollution at the source**, from either traditional or emerging pollutants, rather than relying on treatment afterwards. The wide review of EU water policy, and specific initiatives such as the [Plastics Strategy](#) or the [communication on pharmaceuticals](#), are key instruments.
- **Improving the coordination of all relevant actors, and of legislation to allow policy to produce its effects for protection of water**: coherently interlinking and articulating water laws, notably the Water Framework Directive and the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive (Council [Directive 91/271/EEC](#) of 21 May 1991 on urban waste-water treatment), together and with other sectoral EU policies affecting water: including industry, agriculture, energy; fostering the involvement of all actors through a solid governance framework and support to the development of methodologies for policy assessment, such as the OECD's [Water Governance Initiative](#) or work on environmental governance assessments.
- **Supporting long-term approaches and strategies for climate adaptation**, based on integrated and forward-looking planning, reliable data and measures that address the role of both traditional (grey) and nature-based (green) infrastructure.



Public water operators are fully integrated in their communities, from services to citizens to dynamic research and innovation, and contribute to the development of their economies. As providers of public services, **they strive to respond to public needs, align with evolving requirements and tackle global changes** – such as climate change, demographic shifts and the digital revolution.

To be efficient, water management requires to **harness technological progress**. It relies on scientific research as well as communication innovation - information systems, data collection or smart metering - that creates an interconnected ecosystem and contributes to the **security and the safety of water**, a resource vulnerable to pollution, human activity or malicious threats.

Organisational innovation facilitates relations with users and citizens, reshuffles human resources to adjust to changing needs and opportunities and entails new ways of carrying the duties. Combining technical development with personnel training builds resilient, excellence-driven water management that can adapt to future challenges.

Water management also needs to consider the **state of existing infrastructure**. European networks have been in place for many decades and **management and improvement of assets** are a main focus - reducing leakage rates or building resilient infrastructure contribute to a strong economy.

Acting as **centres of excellence in their communities**, public water operators are economic actors that **create value, dynamism and solutions that are fully adapted to local needs**. Providing ever improving services **requires constant efforts, financial commitments and innovation power**.

Aqua Publica Europea therefore emphasises the EU's role to **support European excellence in water management** by:

- **Facilitating smart investment in water management, that focuses on improving performance.** With the principle that '*water pays for water*', revenue generated from bills should be reinjected in the water cycle. Still, to avoid jeopardising the affordability of water, levels of tariffing may not sufficiently cover investments needed to improve service or comply with legal obligations. Support to efforts with a coherent combination of structural funds and [investment grants](#) from the European Investment Bank (EIB), as well as focus on the potential of local and national public banks, is therefore crucial to bridge the investment gaps throughout the EU.
- **Putting water as a priority in EU research and innovation programmes**, starting with forthcoming [Horizon Europe](#), to foster the development of innovative projects that have the potential for significant improvements in water management for the benefit of entire societies and to continue to place the EU as a leader.
- **Providing a multilateral framework for exchange of expertise and skills development.** Experience sharing is widely acknowledged as an efficient way to boost performances. The participation of all stakeholders, including public water operators, in EU multi-stakeholder dialogue on water is key for policy coherence and implementation. Further, as skills gaps are growing, supporting training with employment policy and funding contributes to building an expert and resilient sector. For their part, public water operators are committed to peer-learning, notably through Aqua Publica Europea's '[Water Erasmus](#)' initiative.