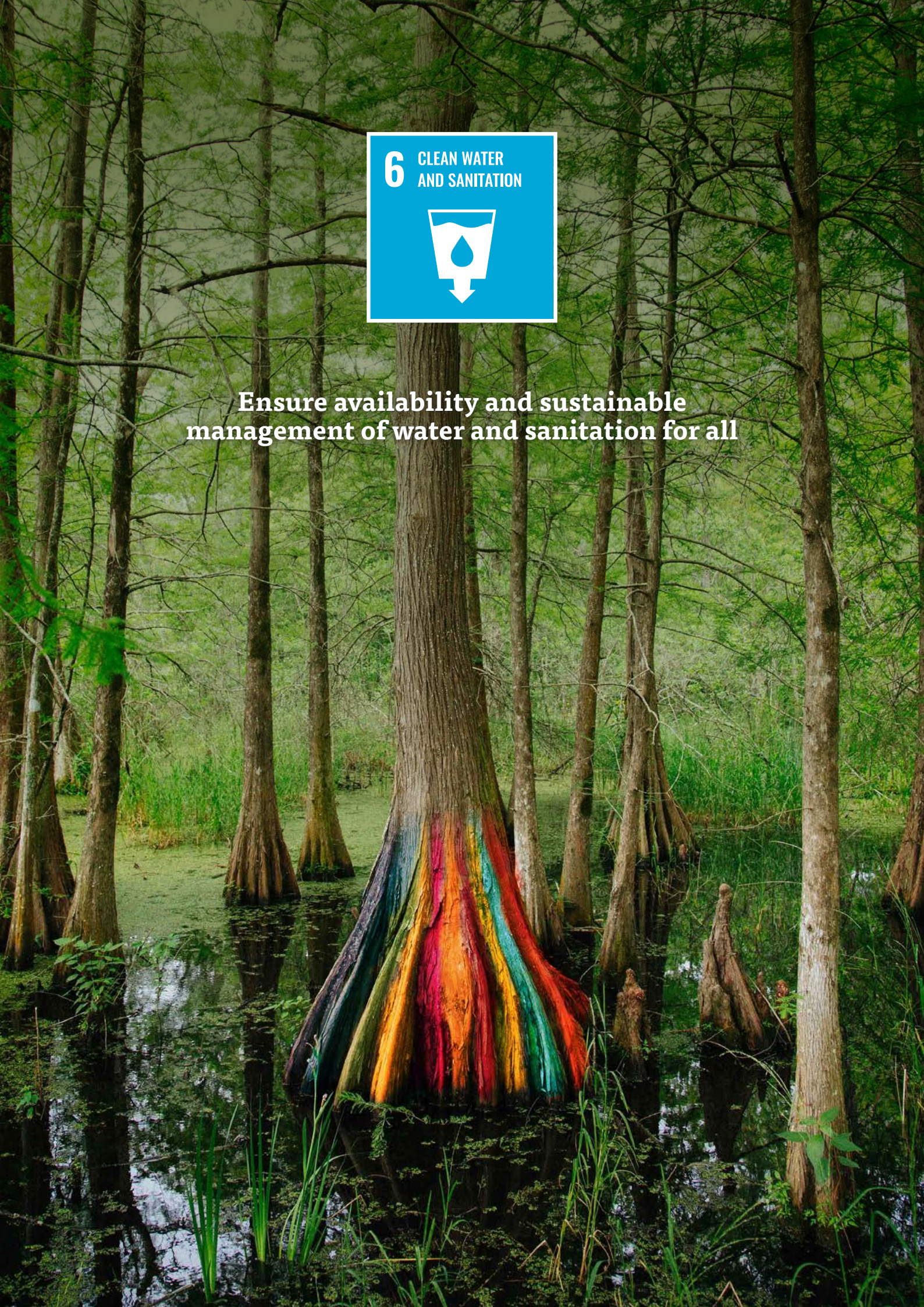


6 CLEAN WATER
AND SANITATION



**Ensure availability and sustainable
management of water and sanitation for all**





| EU internal action

Overview and challenges

Clean water enables life on Earth, nature, human health, agriculture, energy, industry and transport. Good quality water should be available and affordable all year round for people and nature. Almost every EU household has access to safe drinking water and basic sanitary facilities, which constitutes a basic right recognised in the European Pillar of Social Rights. The quality of water services in the EU continues to improve. However, there are still differences in access to these services between and within Member States, especially between rural and urban areas to the detriment of rural residents and the poorest. The situation is still not ideal for some population groups ⁽¹⁸⁾. Water quality in the EU is affected by pollution caused by industry, households and agriculture. Pollution and changes to the structure and flow of waterbodies affect the hydrological cycle and the sustainable reuse of water as well as marine ecosystems. The UN Water Conference has highlighted the interconnections between freshwaters, oceans and “green” water; the Commission is working on these links, not least on a future deliverable aimed at reporting on the actual status of EU’s freshwaters and seas based on the latest River Basin Management Plans and marine measures.

Although progress was made throughout the 1990s, little change has been observed in the past 10 years. This indicates that EU’s ground and surface waters have not yet reached good status. Efficient water use is also a growing concern due to climate change. Changing weather patterns cause more intense and frequent drought periods, lower water levels in summer and

higher surface water temperatures. Besides the damage to ecosystems, droughts cause economic damage of up to EUR 9 billion a year. They cause lower crop yields and lower energy production. Water use efficiency has increased in Europe, but overall water availability is falling. Water stress is now on the rise in western and northern Europe as a direct consequence of climate change.

Key initiatives

The EU has a wide range of legislation, strategies, policies, initiatives and tools in place to contribute to the implementation of SDG 6.

The [Water Framework Directive](#) is the EU’s main legislation to prevent water pollution, ensure water is used and managed in a sustainable way, reduce water stress, and promote water resource efficiency.

The [Drinking Water Directive](#) aims at ensuring the quality and accessibility of drinking water. New requirements are now included to improve or maintain access to safe drinking water for all, particularly for vulnerable and marginalised groups, and to address leakages in water supply networks. A new [Regulation on minimum requirements for water reuse for agricultural irrigation](#) entered into force in June 2020. The new rules will apply from June 2023.

The Directive concerning urban waste-water treatment regulates the collection and discharge of domestic and industrial

⁽¹⁸⁾ For example, according to November 2022 data from the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, one of five Roma households (22%) do not have access to tap water inside their dwelling, which is of particular concern during a pandemic Roma in 10 European countries. Main results – Roma Survey 2021 (europa.eu).

2030 targets and trends at EU level

Target and policy reference

Collection and treatment of urban wastewater was to be ensured at the latest by the end of 2005 for agglomerations of above 10 000 population equivalent (pe) and in some agglomerations with between 2 000 pe and 10 000 pe

Urban Wastewater Directive

Protect human health from the adverse effects of any contamination of water intended for human consumption by ensuring that it is wholesome and clean, and improve access to water

Drinking Water Directive

Protect human health and preserve, protect, and improve the quality of the environment

Bathing Water Directive

Achieve good environmental status of all bodies of surface waters and groundwaters by 2027

Water Framework Directive

Sustainable use of water: reduce water scarcity, measured through the water exploitation index

8th environmental action programme, COM(2022) 357 final

Trends

82 % of Europe's urban wastewater is collected and treated in line with EU standards (source: [European Environment Agency](#)).

In 2020, an estimated 1.8 % of people in EU lived in a dwelling without its own indoor flushing toilet (source: Eurostat). This is 1.9 percentage points less than in 2010 (3.7 %).

23 million people or 4.5 % of the total EU population were not connected to a public water supply in 2018.

Bathing water quality in Europe remains high. The minimum water quality standards, determined primarily by two distinct bacterial values, are met in 93 % of sites.

The share of excellent sites grew continuously from when the Directive was adopted until 2015, when it stabilised at more than 80 %. In 2021, it was 84.8 % across Europe ⁽¹⁸⁾.

Good status is comprised of four assessments: ecological status of surface waters, chemical status of surface waters, chemical status of groundwaters and quantitative status of groundwaters. In 2016, EU-27 countries had achieved 40 % and 33 % of surface waterbodies in good ecological and chemical status respectively; 90 % and 76 % of groundwaters achieved good quantitative and chemical status respectively.

Water scarcity affected 29 % of EU's territory during at least one season in 2019. **Water use efficiency** has increased in agriculture, electricity production, industry, mining, public water supply and tourism. Water consumption in these sectors was 16 % lower in 2017 (the last year for which EU-wide statistics are available) than in 1995, while production in these sectors grew by 20 % in terms of net value added.

From 2000 to 2019, the total volume of water abstracted from surface water and groundwater fell by 15 %, with the relative contribution of groundwater to the total volume abstracted increasing from 19 % to 23 %.

More details on indicators and trends for SDG 6 can be found in the statistical and analytical annex and Eurostat's monitoring report on progress towards the SDGs.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Also relevant to SDG 14 and therefore covered in that chapter.

urban waste waters. A proposal for a revised directive was adopted in October 2022, to address remaining sources of pollution nutrients, micropollutants, and stormwater overflows) and the energy footprint of the water treatment sector and to lay down obligations for Member States concerning access to sanitation. The directive was accompanied by a proposal for the [revision of the lists of surface water pollutants](#), which added several industrial chemicals, pesticides and pharmaceuticals and tightened standards for some of the listed pollutants.

The [Groundwater Directive](#) lays down quality standards and sets out measures to prevent or limit pollutants in groundwater. It sets quality criteria that take local characteristics into account and allows for further improvements to be made based on monitoring data and new scientific knowledge.

The [zero pollution action plan](#) launched in May 2021 sets out key measures to speed up water pollution reduction.

The [Bathing Water Directive](#) requires Member States to monitor and assess bathing water for at least two parameters of (faecal) bacteria.

Selected enablers

The LIFE programme is the EU's funding instrument for the environment and climate action. It includes integrated projects implemented on a larger territorial scale, aimed to help implement EU legislation, including in the area of water. The LIFE programme is a significant supporter of innovation projects relevant to SDG 6. Since 2015, the LIFE programme has funded 94 projects in support of SDG 6 for a budget of EUR 231 million, including on wastewater treatment, water quality, river basin management and innovation.

The 2023-2027 common agricultural policy is built around 10 key objectives, one of which is efficient natural resource management. This objective aims to foster sustainable development and efficient management of natural resources, such as water, soil and air, including by reducing dependency on chemicals.

NextGenerationEU, with an investment plan of more than EUR 800 billion, contributes to protecting the natural environment and achieving SDG 6. This includes improving water quality in rivers and seas and reducing waste and plastic litter.

EU Cohesion policy funds provide major investments in biodiversity, nature, and green infrastructure. Almost EUR 13 billion of the 2021-2027 programmes will be invested in water services and improved wastewater collection and treatment. Cohesion policy will provide EUR 6 billion of support for waste prevention, recycling and reuse of municipal waste; also circular production and consumption practices; and improving resource efficiency. As a result, 16.4 million more people (3.7% of the EU's population) will benefit from clean water supply.

The EU's research and innovation programme, Horizon Europe, dedicates EUR 1.15 billion of funding to projects related to SDG 6 in 2021-2024. Examples of projects recently launched include the 'Partnership Water4All' and 'Green. BOOST', which focus on the foundations to implement large-scale freshwater ecosystem restoration projects and investments. This can deliver sustainable e-flows, good status for surface and ground waters, better long-term water management, improved biodiversity and climate resilience. Another project is 'Stars4Water', which aims to improve the understanding of how climate change affects the availability of water resources and the vulnerabilities for ecosystems, society and economic sectors at river basin scale. The project team will work with seven river basin organisations through a co-creation and living lab approach (contributing to SDG target 6.5).

Another example of an enabler is the project 'Analyses and action plan towards sustainable water services in Estonia' supported by the Structural Reform Support Programme under the 2020 call. Due to a highly fragmented utility sector and the low population density, significant price increases would be required to maintain the existing infrastructure in Estonia. However, these increases would not be affordable for households. Moreover, Estonia lacks a sustainable funding strategy for the long-term operation and maintenance of its drinking water and wastewater treatment services. The project supports the preparation of a roadmap for the consolidation of the water utility sector. Consolidation is a prerequisite for a sustainable and socially acceptable financing strategy.

Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholders are closely involved in developing and implementing EU water policy.

The EU's Water Framework Directive is being implemented through a 'common implementation strategy'. This strategy brings together all relevant stakeholders in several thematic working groups. This results in guidance documents for implementation and exchanges on best practices. It also serves as a source of ideas for further policy innovation.

As pollution has no borders and cooperation between different civil society actors is needed to tackle water pollution, the [Zero Pollution Stakeholder Platform](#) is also useful.

Multi-level approach

SDG delivery implies ambitious action at all levels. Good practices in implementing SDG 6 include the following.

- ▶ Building on the successive Water Summits held in Budapest before and after the adoption of the SDGs, the revised Hungarian national water strategy aims to fully implement SDG 6, together with EU legislation, with a set of specific objectives to be attained by 2030,



including on water management, quality, efficiency and governance.

- ▶ The city of Veliki Preslav in Bulgaria used SDG 6 targets to tackle local water supply challenges. This guided the city in planning their water management process – from bringing water to residential areas to implementing wastewater treatment solutions. Now the city can provide the necessary amount of drinking water to several villages through the recently completed main water pipeline. Abandoned water sources (shaft wells) have been restored and can be used as alternative sources of water.

- ▶ In France, the Seine-et-Marne department has made a concerted approach since 2006 to develop a departmental water plan. This approach has made it possible to obtain agreements on technical solutions, financing and associated action on all the relevant issues for Seine-et-Marne (drinking water supply, sanitation, aquatic environments, flood risks). Many players have been involved: the department, the Seine-Normandy Water Agency (AESN), the Regional Health Agency (ARS), the Association of Mayors of Seine-et-Marne, the Chamber of Agriculture for the Île-de-France region, and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Seine-et-Marne, and 14 other partners.

EU external action

Global trends

The delay in progress on SDG 6 is alarming, in particular as increasing climate change effects will complicate challenges on water availability worldwide, with implications for peace, stability and displacement.

Access to water and sanitation is essential for human development and economic growth. However, access is under pressure due to rising global demand, combined with misuse, poor management, over-extraction of groundwater, contamination of freshwater supplies, and more variable weather patterns resulting from climate change. Although access to water and sanitation has continued to expand worldwide, most of the population living in Sub-Saharan Africa and least developed countries still have no access to basic facilities, increasing public health risks, especially for women, children and vulnerable groups.

Internal/external coherence including policy coherence for development

With implications across most SDGs, action on water and sanitation is an essential part of the EU's policy mix. At the UN 2023 Water Conference in March 2023, which was the first of its kind since 1977 and played a crucial role for mobilising stakeholders and sectors to catalyse political momentum on water to progress towards achieving SDG 6, the EU highlighted the strategic and cross-sectoral importance of water and sanitation, and supported the new Water Action Agenda, including through a set of commitments. The EU supports the emphasis on the need to ensure a comprehensive approach on water-related challenges, including for achieving food and energy security and climate objectives, and the acknowledgement of the critical links between addressing water stress and environmental protection, biodiversity and ecosystem preservation.

In this context, [the Council conclusions on Water Diplomacy](#) promote the use of water as a tool for peace, security and global stability, through which the EU aims to prevent conflicts and promote transboundary cooperation in regions where access to water is under threat, to ensure the effective and sustainable use and management of shared resources. The EU also joined the [Transboundary Water Cooperation Coalition](#), spearheaded by UNECE, to promote transboundary cooperation on water.

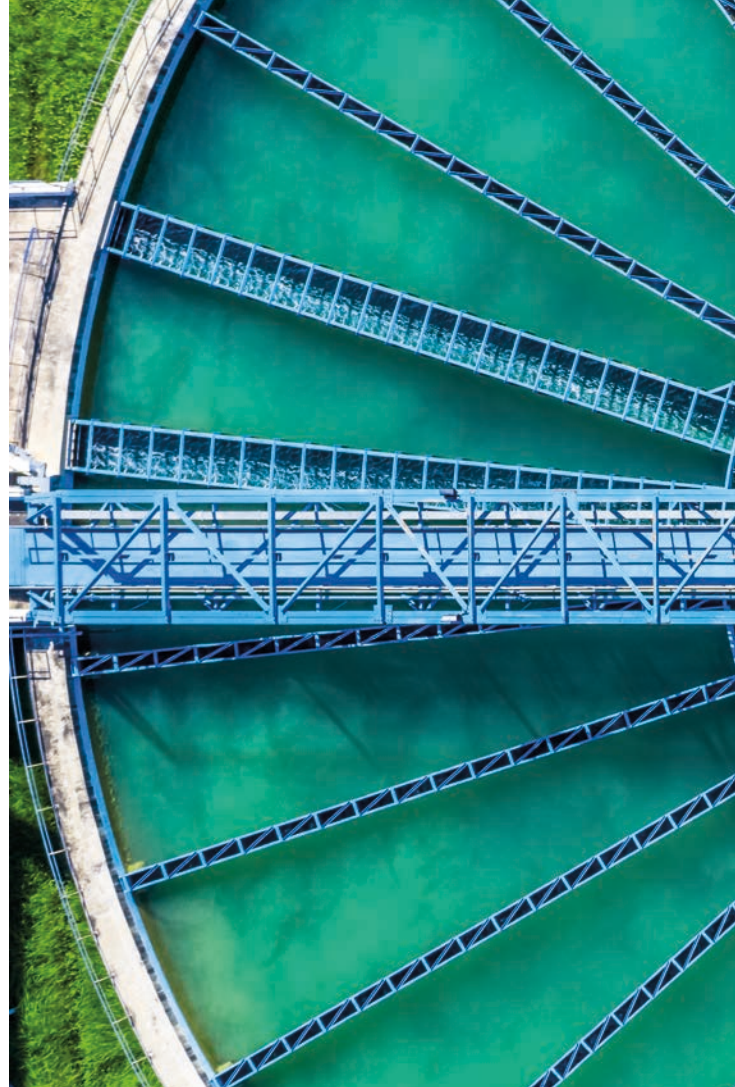
The human right to [safe drinking water and sanitation](#) and the role of [water to maintain sustainable environmental, social, cultural and economic systems at global, regional and local levels](#) are also promoted and protected by the EU, including in its external action. Considering its interlinkages with other SDGs, water can also help deliver on development priorities in different sectors, [including food systems, health, energy and industry](#), and at different levels, from local to global.

EU water policy has a direct bearing on the quality of surrounding freshwater and marine water. For instance, the investment in wastewater treatment has reduced the concentrations of nutrients and other pollutants in the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea considerably. The removal of barriers in rivers has improved the conditions for migrating fish. Integrated river basin management, particularly further to the Water Framework Directive, has been used as an example for river basins outside the EU.

EU space technologies play a crucial role in optimising processing operations for higher quality drinking water. Copernicus, the EU's Earth observation programme, in particular the Copernicus Land Monitoring Service, systematically provides real-time information on the state of global inland waterbodies and their seasonal replenishment, lake and river water levels, temperature, turbidity and trophic state, including potential water availability from snow and ice cover. Better information and forecasts help many water managers adapt their strategies when dealing with water allocation, flood management, ecological status and industrial water use to mitigate the effects of climate change.

EU and Member States external financial support for SDG implementation and results

In 2021, EU institutions reported to OECD EUR 3 billion in commitments to projects contributing to SDG 6. The main share of the EU's contribution is for projects that target SDG 6 as the main SDG. These projects also contribute to other interlinked SDGs, such as SDG 3, SDG 5 and SDG 11. SDG 13 and SDG 14. The EU also made a sizeable contribution to SDG 6 through projects targeting the SDG as a significant



objective. The main contributors are SDG 1, SDG 8 and SDG 9. When taking into account also other official flows, private funds mobilized through public intervention and support to international public goods, the Total Official Support to Sustainable Development (TOSSD) of the EU to SDG 6 amounted to EUR 6.3 billion in 2021. In terms of selected results of assistance ⁽¹⁹⁾, the EU supported more than 17 million people with access to an improved drinking water resource and/or sanitation facility in 2018-2021.

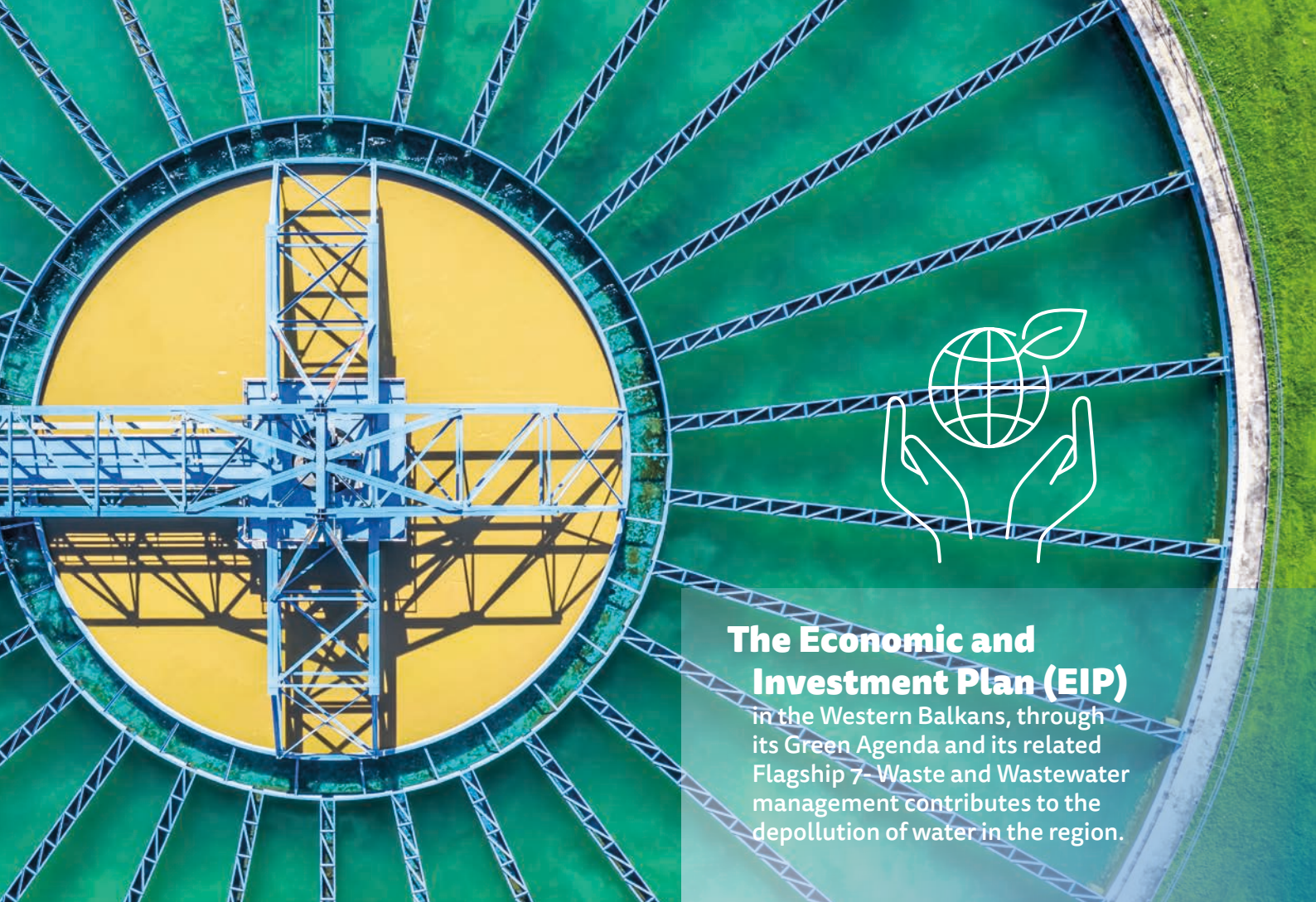
Collectively, the EU and those Member States that reported on SDGs to the OECD in 2021 contributed EUR 5.8 billion to SDG 6. EU and Member State flows to SDG 6 in 2021 predominantly focused on projects in Africa (51%), Asia (20%) and other European countries (14%).

Main policy orientations and initiatives for external engagement

The EU's key priorities are to:

- ▶ support access to safe drinking water and sanitation, including ensuring timely and dignified access to sufficient and safe water and sanitation services for people caught in humanitarian crises;

⁽¹⁹⁾ For the methodology on results, please see the description under SDG 2.



The Economic and Investment Plan (EIP)

in the Western Balkans, through its Green Agenda and its related Flagship 7 – Waste and Wastewater management contributes to the depollution of water in the region.

- ▶ support the protection and restoration of freshwater ecosystems;
- ▶ support the protection and sustainable use of water resources, including by addressing pollution, water scarcity (e.g., the circular economy) and the water-ecosystems-food-energy-climate nexus;
- ▶ strengthen water governance, including transboundary water cooperation as a catalyst for peace and security, and global governance.

The EU policy approach to water is multidimensional. The EU has integrated support to water and sanitation in partner countries across several policies, and these interlinkages are explicit in many key EU policy documents, such as the [gender action plan](#) or the [Farm to Fork strategy](#). In the [new consensus on development](#), the EU and Member States have committed to increasing access to water, sanitation and hygiene services and promoting integrated water resource management, conservation of water resources, and improved water use efficiency and recycling. The EU has now made explicit its global commitments on water in the context of the UN 2023 Water Conference and the recently adopted Water Action Agenda.

These main policy orientations are developed through several leading global and regional initiatives. The Team Europe initiative (TEI) Transboundary Water Management in Africa launched at the EU-African Union Summit, will contribute

to the 2030 Agenda, notably SDG 6, by supporting transboundary water management in Africa to support development and regional integration. This TEI supports the roll-out of the Global Gateway strategy. The EU (including the EIB) and seven EU Member States combine their efforts to contribute to policies and strategies (through improved knowledge, data and research), institutional capacities and frameworks, participatory processes and coordination for improved transboundary water management and key investments. A broad range of interlinked SDGs (in particular SDGs 2, 5, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15 and 16) will also be supported through this TEI.

Following the EU's policy guidance, the EU has developed an integrated package to address some of the challenges affecting Central Asia by setting up a regional Team Europe Initiative for Central Asia on Water, Energy and Climate. This initiative's measures have strong interlinkages between SDG 6, SDG 7 and SDG 15. The ultimate goal is to support the region's transition towards a green economy, promoting food security, jobs, growth, and sustainable development, while maintaining climate neutrality and environmental sustainability. This TEI supports the roll-out of the Global Gateway strategy.

The economic and investment plan (EIP) in the Western Balkans, through its Green Agenda and its Flagship 7 on waste and wastewater management, contributes to the depollution of water in the region.

The EU plays an active role in framing, advocating and implementing a global agenda for access to basic humanitarian services on safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in humanitarian crises, in collaboration with the EU MS, international partners and local actors. Ensuring that these services are available to the most vulnerable is essential in humanitarian aid operations, in particular in acute and chronic crises (e.g., operations in South Sudan and in the Sahel zone). And special attention must be given to the needs of women and girls. WASH-related assistance also contributes to disaster risk reduction and disaster preparedness strategies by anticipating severe water scarcity crises, which have the potential to spark massive displacement (e.g., in Afghanistan). Adapted responses include water contingency planning, climate adaptation, groundwater level monitoring, and repairs and rehabilitation, including upgrading water systems.

Examples of EU actions (with a focus on Global Gateway and Team Europe initiatives)

In support of the implementation of SDG 6, water and sanitation are also among the priority investment sectors covered by the European Fund for Sustainable Development+ (EFSD+). Building on the EU's special partnership with Cabo Verde, the Team Europe Initiative 'To Green Cabo Verde', delivered as part of the Global Gateway, will contribute to several SDGs (including 6, 7, 13, 2, 14). It will focus on investments (blending and guarantees under EFSD+), strengthening capacity through technical assistance and twinning, dialogue, cooperation and budget support. The measures will be based on four key green pillars: (i) green tourism and green jobs; (ii) sustainable energies; (iii) sustainable access to water and sanitation; and (iv) agriculture and the blue economy.

Similarly, in the Eastern Neighbourhood, the regional Team Europe initiative Water and Zero Pollution will continue supporting policy dialogue on water, including on water supply and sanitation, to refine national SDG 6 targets. In addition, innovative monitoring approaches are being deployed at the intersection of epidemiology and wastewater management. As a result, with Austria in the lead, the technical capacity for monitoring the SARS-CoV-2 virus in wastewater is being strengthened across the region (in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova).

The EU's [water operators partnerships](#) (EU-WOP) programme is a 4-year initiative, led by the UN-Habitat's Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance and funded by the EU. The EU-WOP programme supports partnerships among water operators in partner countries and helps utilities acquire and apply knowledge, establish new practices and implement improved approaches

Greece is leading cross-border cooperation on integrated water resource management between itself, Albania, North

Macedonia and the EU. This cooperation focuses on the protection and sustainable development of the Prespa Park Area in the West Balkans and provides an institutional framework and joint activities to address the serious pressure on the lakes caused by climate change and biodiversity loss.

In the neighbourhood region, support relevant to SDG 6 is also being provided bilaterally. For example, the EU supports Georgia in its efforts on environmental sustainability and improved living conditions in rural areas by contributing to increased access to improved and sustainable water supply and wastewater treatment in the semi-urban and rural areas of the Adjara region. The project supports the creation of centralised and decentralised water and wastewater supply systems in all the villages and settlements of the region's municipalities.

The EU provides safe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene support through its humanitarian support through its humanitarian aid and Civil Protection Mechanism, with its main objective to save and preserve life and alleviate the suffering of populations facing severe environmental health risks and water insecurity in the context of anticipated, ongoing and recent humanitarian crises, for example in Venezuela, South Sudan (focusing on the risk of waterborne diseases) and Ethiopia (focusing on ensuring access to drinking water and promoting hygiene and sanitation for displaced and host communities affected by crises).

Action by the EU and its Member States are mutually reinforcing and coordinated to ensure complementarity and impact in support of the SDGs. In addition to acting together with the EU through joint programming and Team Europe initiatives, Member States carry out their own projects in support of the 2030 Agenda, including SDG 6, such as the following initiatives.

- ▶ Hungary contributes to achieving SDG 6 across the world. Examples include equipping schools in Ugandan refugee settlements with innovative drinking water systems, providing mobile purification systems to Kyrgyzstan, contributing to the reconstruction of Iraq's water utility and irrigation systems, strengthening Ukraine's flood management system, and supporting water management facilities in several Southeast Asian countries.
- ▶ To assist in tackling the challenges of drought and the increasing unpredictability of southwestern African water supplies (due to increased water consumption and climate change), experts from the Danish Environmental Protection Agency are working with South African authorities and Danish businesses by offering solutions with both knowledge and products. This collaboration on sustainable water supply focuses on five specific areas: groundwater, water wastage, water efficiency in industry, water sector financing, and research and innovation.



- ▶ Spain's Cooperation Fund for Water and Sanitation has developed programmes for institutional strengthening, community development and promotion of water and sanitation services in 18 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. This is achieved through national strategies, hydrological plans, and updating legislation with the aim of supporting partner countries in the development of public policies and influencing the human right to water and sanitation. Action

is focused on rural and peri-urban areas and aims to reduce poverty and inequality. Some of the regional administrations, such as Aragon, are also supporting SDG 6. This includes working in Guatemala and Nicaragua to provide families with household water systems and latrines and giving training on hygienic-sanitary habits and how to maintain sanitation infrastructures.

Looking ahead

Emerging challenges such as new pollutants and climate change require keeping EU water policy up to date. Implementation of existing legislation is also key to reaching the SDG targets.

Integrated water resources management, including through protecting, restoring and improving aquatic ecosystems and increasing the efficiency of water use in all sectors, is essential for economic development, health, food and energy security as well as climate objectives. The recent hot and dry European summers have underlined the need for Europe to become more water resilient to serve all legitimate water needs for health, nature and the economy, in a sustainable manner all year round. Restoring water availability will require efficient use of freshwater. This can be helped by applying volumetric pricing more widely, with appropriate social safeguards, setting water efficiency standards in agriculture and industry, and promoting the sustainable development of alternative water sources, such as wastewater reuse.

On the external side, the EU will continue to use water support initiatives as diplomatic and development tools. This will therefore contribute not only to SDG 6 but also deliver on many interlinked SDGs (including SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 4, 7, 9,

11, 17) at different scales, from local to global. In particular, the EU will further strengthen its commitment to SDG 6 as follow up to the UN 2023 Water Conference in March 2023. The EU will contribute to the WAA with a set of EU commitments, including improving access to water and sanitation, supporting multilateralism on water with the UN at its core, and strengthening transboundary water cooperation. This commitment includes further developing several Team Europe initiatives on water, which have been launched at regional and national level and will contribute to rolling out the Global Gateway strategy, such as the 'Water, Energy and Climate Change in Central Asia' and the 'Transboundary Water Management in Africa', launched at the EU-AU Summit.

In its humanitarian work, the EU will continue to take action in the WASH sector, particularly with other sectors, such as health, nutrition and shelter. The approach to water supply in humanitarian situations must be closely aligned with development approaches to ensure sustainability. In addition, the minimum environmental requirements and recommendations for EU-funded humanitarian aid operations will be applied from 2023. These will promote sustainable access to water and limit water over-extraction and pollution of water sources from waste.