

CLIMATE CHANGE, ENERGY AND  
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# FROM CRISIS TO COOPERATION: ADDRESSING MEDITERRANEAN WATER GOVERNANCE THROUGH COORDINATED ACTION

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In the realm of water governance, the roles of governments, civil society, and the private sector are pivotal. For an effective multi-level governance strategy, it's essential to have a clear definition and comprehension of the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder, as well as their interactions within the governance structure. The diversity of water governance systems in the region, despite facing similar challenges, stands as one of the primary issues in this context.



As water scarcity becomes more pressing, the importance of collaborative action at the regional level will grow. Numerous regional initiatives are mainly problematic due to perceived inefficiencies and incompatibilities in institutions, as well as the slow and overly cautious progress in reaching a consensus on a regional water policy.



To successfully tackle water-related challenges, it's essential to guarantee that the various regional water initiatives in the Mediterranean are compatible with each other.



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# INTRODUCTION

One of today's most persistent global challenges is water resources and their management, more specifically: the allocation, timing, and methods of distribution of water; the entitlement to water and its associated services and the resultant advantages. There are many and diverse factors affecting the use and management of water resources, including political, societal, economic, and administrative systems; water governance refers to the complex interaction of these factors. In this context, the quest for water security, the equitable allocation of water resources, and the prevention of conflicts arising from their utilization and management converge at a critical juncture: the establishment of a robust water governance framework.

This framework, in relation to the perilous water situation in the Mediterranean region, underscores how important effective water governance is to the area's sustainable and secure future. The Mediterranean water crisis reveals the ramifications of good governance versus its absence, as well as the dynamics underlying efforts to achieve water resource sustainability at the regional level. Because the water issue involves stakeholders at municipal, regional, national and international levels, good governance requires a clear understanding of these interdependencies across policy areas and between levels of government.

Currently, efforts to develop a robust intra-regional water governance framework are blocked by numerous impediments, notably the many individual regional initiatives. To effectively address climate change and water challenges requires coordinated efforts that transcend borders and divisions in the region. This can only be achieved via regional dialogue, which must ultimately establish institutions, procedures, and mechanisms to formalize effective water governance. While there is no single way to address governance issues in the water sector, this brief will highlight the need for locally tailored and context-specific policies from a multi-level governance perspective.

# 1. MULTIPLE WATER GOVERNING REGIMES IN A SINGLE AREA WITH SHARED CHALLENGES: UN-LED VS. EU-DRIVEN APPROACHES

Governments, civil society, and the private sector each assume an important role in water governance regimes. A robust multi-level governance perspective demands that everyone's roles and responsibilities are clearly delineated as well as placed in the context of their interplay within the governance framework. This section examines the history and background of various collective responses in the Mediterranean context, in order to identify the policy measures that underlie and promote collective action on water governance at the regional level.

Access to water is a fundamental human right; this is clearly articulated in the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which calls for water's equitable provision, particularly within the Mediterranean region where there are many challenges to fair water governance. While more than 180 million people are water-poor in the Mediterranean region, the majority of jobs are water-dependent; moreover, spatial and temporal distribution of water resources are uneven, at both regional and national levels. And there are further complications, such as population growth and urbanization, unregulated use of surface and groundwater resources, the region's geopolitical dynamics, and the effects of climate change.

The first efforts for a regional environmental collaboration among the Mediterranean states addressed marine environmental degradation and managing water resources within the framework of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Regional Seas Programme. It resulted in the 1975 Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP). Just a year later the Barcelona Convention was adopted, which aimed at safeguarding the Mediterranean Sea from pollution. In 1995 the convention was modified, with its objectives and range considerably expanded such that it was renamed the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment and Coastal Region of the Mediterranean, which included seven protocols. The second phase of the Mediterranean Action Plan was launched in 2005, again focused on marine pollution but with a broader agenda, now emphasized the sustainable management of natural resources in the Mediterranean region and the integrated governance of coastal areas. Within this context, the 2016-2025 Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD) offers a comprehensive policy framework that engages all stakeholders, including MAP

partners, in the localization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across various tiers — from regional and sub-regional to national and local levels — within the Mediterranean region.

The process of developing a regional strategy for freshwater management has primarily occurred outside the Mediterranean Action Plan and was set in motion by the Mediterranean Charter for Water, ratified in 1992 at a Rome meeting of Water Department ministers from Mediterranean basin states. The 1992 adoption of this charter highlights the critical importance of water for all Mediterranean partners. The objectives of this collaboration included: assessment of the current situation while considering present and future requirements; exploring avenues to enhance regional cooperation; recommendations for streamlining the planning and administration of water resources, potentially through joint efforts. The charter played a pivotal role in shaping the water chapter of the Barcelona Declaration in 1995, which further acknowledged concern over increasing water scarcity in Mediterranean countries.

In this context, in 2008 the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) was established, an action that signalled increased concern over water resources and environmental issues in the region. However, the existence of so many and varied programs and initiatives made it challenging to establish a unified, cohesive water agenda. The European Union's Horizon 2020 Initiative focused on reducing pollution in the Mediterranean and, even more importantly, aimed to foster collaboration among the regional programs led by the UN, the UfM, and the EU. Horizon 2020 also has some areas of overlap with the Mediterranean segment of the EU Water Initiative (MED EUWI). Under the UfM a Euro-Mediterranean Water Expert Group was formed, tasked to formulate a Mediterranean water strategy; in April 2010 at a Euro-Mediterranean conference, the group presented a draft strategy. The need for such a strategy was serious, as there was widespread recognition of the escalating challenges related to water abstraction-- i.e., greater agriculture, industry and domestic consumption demands combined with rising seawater intrusion into coastal aquifers due to the overexploitation of groundwater resources. Despite collective recognition of these challenges, there were difficulties in aligning

implementation strategies. Mediterranean countries both within and outside the EU argued for different objectives, and this delay in concluding a strategy meant that non-EU countries were given extended timelines related to river basin planning and management.

Efforts to develop a regional water strategy have also been / are still obstructed by geopolitical challenges and political tensions in the region; for example, Israel objected to references to the occupied territories in the UfM's draft water strategy plan, resulting in a deadlock in 2010. The UfM strategy, which views and organizes cooperation in line with European water governance norms, has led to sovereignty-related concerns among several non-EU Mediterranean states. Egypt and Turkey, for example, have raised objections to any collaboration on transboundary water resources in the Mediterranean that align with established international water law, including the 1992 Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes and the 1997 Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses. Neither nation has ratified these two conventions, arguing for prior usage rights to significant transboundary waters that flow through their territories. Although in 2016 the Water Expert Group revised the Mediterranean water strategy, the emphasis was on technical aspects of shared interest rather than the political and legal aspects of international cooperation.

In 2017, during the first UfM ministerial meeting in Malta, their Water Agenda was initiated, and has since served as a pivotal initiative addressing the region's specific water challenges, with a particular emphasis on water financing and investment. In 2018 it produced the UfM Financial Strategy for Water; in 2019 it offered recommendations for involving private investors and fostering public-private partnerships; in 2021 it presented proposals for enhancing water investment policies. In October 2022, a high-level conference convened leading voices/entities in Mediterranean water policy to explore strategies for bolstering water finance and investment policies, resulting in a comprehensive plan on water finance and investment geared towards building climate resilience. Named the Cairo Action Agenda, this initiative is directed at national governments, with active involvement from stakeholders and partners. In November 2022, the UfM Water Expert Group (WEG) approved the Cairo Action Agenda, which was then subsequently disseminated by the UfM co-presidencies to all its member states for further action and implementation. One could argue that the water agenda advanced by the UfM within the sphere of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation represents a notable European achievement. Yet, the question remains: to what extent do these policies really encompass a broad strategy - one that involves multiple stakeholders - to ensure and facilitate coordinated collective action in the region?

## 2. THE CHALLENGE OF CONCERTED COLLECTIVE ACTION

The significance of collective action at the regional level will only deepen as water scarcity becomes increasingly urgent. A lack of collective efforts will render impossible the formulation of recommendations to improve water resource planning and management. It is for this reason that the myriad regional initiatives are of particular concern, primarily due to perceived institutional ineffectiveness and incompatibility, but also because of the very gradual and very cautious pace of agreeing on a water policy within the region.

### BUILDING A DISTINCTIVE REGIONAL COOPERATION FRAMEWORK

To address the water crisis at the regional level, there must be a concerted effort to devise a water management framework that is efficient, equitable, and environmentally sustainable. Furthermore, any water governance agenda at the regional level must be able to accommodate multi-level governance.

In order to effectively address water-related crises, it is crucial to ensure that the multiple regional water initiatives in the Mediterranean are mutually compatible and individually accountable. Many Mediterranean states have delegated intricate and resource-demanding tasks to local governments, resulting in interdependencies at various levels of government - these must be coordinated. Effective policies must be coherent, well-structured, well-regulated, transparent, and engage stakeholders appropriately.

### THE WAY FORWARD

It is imperative to establish long-term strategies that are strongly linked to action plans. In light of the above discussion, the Mediterranean water governance framework can be enhanced through the following measures:

- i. Better coordination of pre-existing initiatives; programs that work in concert will have maximal impact.
- ii. Greater focus on cross-border collaboration; fostering stronger ties among Mediterranean nations will address shared water challenges more effectively.
- iii. Greater emphasis on new conflict resolution mechanisms that prioritize dialogue; this will lead to collaborative solutions.
- iv. Closer attention to the funding of and investment in water strategies; this will ensure successful implementation of these initiatives.

# 3.

## CONCLUSION

This policy brief has focused on the management of water resources in the Mediterranean region and has examined water concerns within the broader framework of collaborative efforts at the regional level. It has emphasized the importance of adopting a multi-level governance approach to address water challenges most effectively.

A regional perspective must adopt a comprehensive approach, one that considers the societal and economic dimensions of water as well as the scientific viewpoint on water resources. Taking proactive steps to address water challenges will not only enhance the region's resilience, but it will also mitigate the potential consequences of inaction in other areas, such as massive migration flows, economic downturns, and regional conflicts. In alignment with a proactive and cooperative approach to governance, it becomes imperative to give primacy to the regional policies, as they serve as the cornerstone for our collective welfare.



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The pursuit of water security, fair distribution of water resources, and avoidance of conflicts related to their use and management are crucially linked to the development of a strong water governance framework. This framework is particularly relevant to the critical water situation in the Mediterranean region, highlighting the importance of effective water governance for the region's sustainable and secure future. The water crisis in the Mediterranean illustrates the impact of good versus poor governance

and the dynamics involved in striving for sustainable water resources at a regional level. Presently, the creation of a solid intra-regional water governance framework faces several obstacles, especially due to numerous independent regional initiatives. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution for governance issues in the water sector, this brief emphasizes the importance of developing locally adapted, context-specific policies from multi-level governance perspectives.