



GLOBE EU Recommendations “The Future of Water”

Introduction

On 28 July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly explicitly recognized¹ the human right to water and sanitation and acknowledged that clean drinking water and sanitation are essential to the realisation of all human rights.

The UN recognized the right of every human being to have access to sufficient water for personal and domestic uses (50-100l, per person per day), which must be safe, acceptable and affordable (not exceed 3% of household income), and physically accessible (within 1000m and 30 minutes). These values were later enshrined in the SDG 6 and its specific targets for 2030.

The world will need 40% more fresh water by 2030 than is currently available. The earth's supply is fixed: all we will ever have is here already. The best way forward is to substantially reduce our consumption of fresh water (i.e., at least 50%) and minimize the use of other, more energy-intensive, solutions, such as desalination.

As fresh water becomes an increasingly scarce resource in all regions of the world, including Europe, competition will increase among and between different users: households, farmers, and industries.

How to encourage each group to use water more efficiently and how to allocate water among users are the key challenges for the future of water in Europe.

To respond to these challenges, our society needs to view water as a shared, limited resource and move away from a linear model where water is extracted, used and returned to nature as waste water. GLOBE EU urges the European Commission to apply Circular Economy principles to EU water legislation to:

- Reduce water consumption;
- Reuse water in closed loops;
- Recycle water after use.

The following recommendations outline practical measures to adapt and strengthen the existing EU legislative framework to tomorrow's unprecedented water challenges.

¹Resolution 64/292

How to better plan water availability and allocation?

Good water governance should involve all users around a given river basin and should be driven by long-term environmental, economic and social objectives, to avoid resorting to extreme water restrictions measures in times of crisis. All water users should be involved on a level playing field in multi-stakeholder community dialogues with river basin managing authorities. They should collectively agree on how to best allocate water among different users and consider implementing integrated solutions for the reuse of waste water when suitable (e.g., industrial symbiosis). Because restrictions on the use of water should be a last resort, GLOBE EU recommends that:

- decisions be made by governing bodies that are shielded from short-term electoral pressure.

Even in open, participatory water management systems, generating awareness about how water stress will affect Europe, and not just Southern Europe, remains a challenge. All water users need to understand the potential detrimental effect of water shortage. Water users also need to be conscious of their own impact on the availability and quality of water in their community. GLOBE EU, therefore, recommends:

- full transparency to all end users (not only households, but also farmers and industries, even when off the grid) on the water quantity and quality in their river basin, on leakage rates for the local water infrastructure, and on cost structures.

Transparency is a pre-requisite for understanding that water must be preserved as a resource and ensures that all users have access to the same information when being involved in local decision making on water management.

Legislators can also send a strong political signal by making water efficiency a clear policy objective in EU legislation. While current EU water legislation is more focused on quality, it should be fully aligned with circular economy principles to reuse and recycle water whenever possible. GLOBE EU recommends that:

- the next EU Commission make water preservation one of the EU's high priorities. Overall responsibility should be assigned to a Commission Vice-President to avoid that conflicting political interests hinder the introduction of measures to reduce water consumption.
- improving water efficiency become a policy objective in vertical EU legislation such as the Industrial Emissions Directive and the Common Agriculture Policy to address the sectors where water efficiency will offer the greatest potential for sustainable economic development;

While the objective to preserve water should be global, the best way to achieve this will depend on the local situation. Each river basin (which determines the supply of water) and each community (which determines the demand for water from different users) have different water needs and challenges. To take account of this need for subsidiarity, GLOBE EU recommends that:

- the EU Commission consider introducing the concept of context-based targets for water abstraction, water reuse and/or water recycling at river basin and/or catchment level, leaving each community the responsibility to decide how to allocate water among users in the most efficient way.

How to incentivise water efficiency amongst all users?

Once the objective of increasing water efficiency has been made clear and is measured against a context-based target, policy makers need to provide market conditions for users to reduce their water consumption and reach those targets.

A first requirement to incentivise the uptake of water efficiency solutions is to instil among users a high level of confidence that water is still safe for consumption. Although the EU already contributes to this by managing emerging pollutants, GLOBE EU recommends that, in addition:

- requirements for water reuse and close-loop solutions in industry and in agriculture be adapted to make them at the same time safe and workable.

These solutions will only be attractive if they are affordable. While access to water is a human right, the price of water should cover not only infrastructure costs but also the external environmental costs, as the Water Framework Directive already requires. In addition, for agricultural and industrial production which together represent close to 90% of water use, GLOBE EU recommends that:

- water be priced where possible according to availability (e.g. higher prices in water-stressed areas) and/or efficiency (e.g. lower water price when users have implemented water-saving solutions or progressive price based on consumption level), keeping in mind the SDG 6 requirement of “universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all”.

In an economic environment where the price of water is so low that water efficiency solutions have a low return on investment, it is also necessary to allocate EU funds for research, for regional development, and for agriculture to support the development and market uptake of existing and cost-efficient solutions, in particular amongst small and medium industrial players, small farmers, and vulnerable population groups.

Investment in infrastructure such as dual piping whereby recycled water is shared among industrial and institutional users using a piping system that is different from that used for drinking water to avoid contamination, should also be supported to facilitate the implementation of integrated water reuse and nutrient recovery solutions between different users (e.g., industrial symbiosis).

Private investment in water efficiency solutions needs to be boosted by making the business case clearer for economic operators. To that end, GLOBE EU recommends that:

- non-financial reporting rules be made more specific through the introduction of water efficiency indicators, including at least an evaluation of the water risk using tools such as water shadow pricing.

Finally, as water efficiency solutions contribute to significant energy savings, and thus contribute to CO₂ emissions reduction, Member States should use energy efficiency incentives, which are available in the framework of the Energy Efficiency Directive, to encourage water efficiency solutions.
