



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION  
OF PUBLIC WATER OPERATORS

# POST-COVID-19 RECOVERY

The role of public water services for a more resilient, fairer and greener EU

As Europe is slowly starting to emerge from the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis which has deeply affected citizens' lives, economies and public systems throughout the EU, the focus is now on drawing the lessons from the emergency and its management and on re-building. The sanitary crisis rang the alarm, reminding us what matters the most and signalling necessary changes in our lifestyles. As we enter the recovery, it is paramount to make the EU more resilient, fairer and more respectful of our resources.

Aqua Publica Europea, the European Association of Public Water Operators, represents a public sector that has been at the forefront of the crisis response by ensuring the provision of safe water to all through difficult times. Looking forward, public water operators will also be instrumental in the economic recovery by playing an important part in a reconstruction focused on greener development.

The members of Aqua Publica Europea have the potential to be great partners in the considerable efforts to be deployed: as a public common good, water is essential for society's health and wellbeing and central for socio-economic recovery; whilst public services play a unique role in territorial development.

**As the EU reflects and shapes the world of tomorrow, it is critical to define priorities and avoid the shortcomings that have participated in the situation we have experienced.**

## ABOUT AQUA PUBLICA EUROPEA

Aqua Publica Europea is the European Association of Public Water Operators. For the past ten years, it has united publicly owned water and sanitation services and other stakeholders working to promote public water management at European and international levels. Aqua Publica gathers 65 members serving more than 70 million people, in an operator-led association that looks for efficient solutions that serve the public rather than corporate interests.



**PUBLIC WATER AND SANITATION SERVICES CONTRIBUTE TO EU AND INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL COMMITMENTS AND ARE INSTRUMENTAL IN A FAIRER SOCIETY.**

**THE CONTINUITY OF WATER SERVICES IS ESSENTIAL AND NEEDS TO BE SUPPORTED.**

# 1

## **PUBLIC WATER SERVICES: ESSENTIAL SERVICES THAT LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND**

Throughout the crisis, public services have demonstrated their vital importance for societies. Health workers, waste collection, transport, water and sanitation services and others have displayed unwavering commitment to their public missions. Faced with a new and unprecedented emergency, they showed robust capacity to adapt rapidly and adopt the necessary measures to continue providing essential services. Cities and regions kept running thanks to the dedication of thousands of women and men driven by their daily mission to serve their communities.

In line with the EU Pillars of Social Rights[1] (Pillar 20: 'Access to essential services') and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals[2] (SDG 6: '*Clean Water and Sanitation*'), public water operators demonstrated significant capacity to react fast and well. Business continuity plans and crises units were put in place to guarantee that, as people were staying home, high quality safe water was still flowing at their taps at all times, thus allowing to fulfil basic needs from drinking to hygiene. Trans-European cooperation has been instrumental to work in solidarity and learn from one another, across countries and regions.

As an example, the members of Aqua Publica Europea have exchanged regularly on their experiences and the measures they adopted over the course of several online meetings - a summary of these measures was published for the use of all interested operators.

In a difficult time, water availability and quality have not been elements of worry. The bond between citizens and their water operators was maintained and even reinforced, notably through communications efforts to inform and reassure about water quality as well as the adaptation of customer services with the use of a range of inclusive instruments – from boosted online services to phone permanencies.

Many measures were implemented to leave no one behind and support populations in most fragile situations: billing processes were suspended or postponed; public water fountains provided water to more vulnerable populations – in the city of Paris, for example, it was decided to keep fountains running to ensure access to water – and critical works continued to prevent risks.

As we face an economically difficult time, it is important to

remember that, in crises as throughout the year, water and sanitation remain affordable services – tap water costs about €0.002 per litre in the EU[3].

The public water sector has fulfilled its indispensable mission by ensuring, in parallel, the safety of workers as a matter of priority with protective measures, personal equipment and reorganisation of work, spaces and teams.

At the same time, public water operators' revenue and financial planning will also be affected, hence impacting in some areas the capacity to carry out investments. Still, the investment needs in the water sector represent about €289 billion by 2030[4] to comply with EU legislation.

Considering the EU's recovery and the ambition for a green transition, the European Commission acknowledges the role of water and assesses[5], as part of the proposed Recovery Strategy, investment gaps at €15 billion per year for waste water management, €20 billion per year for the management of waters.

Public water services are central in a citizen-oriented framework that leaves no one behind and have proven to be able to support societies by providing necessary services with continuity and excellence. Their fundamental role needs to be fully acknowledged and supported, including through financial mechanisms to maintain strong services.

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## REFERENCES

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# 2

## REBUILDING ECONOMIES: THE ECONOMIC ROLE OF PUBLIC WATER SERVICES

The EU will now be facing one of the greatest challenges of its existence: the looming crisis stemming from the several months long shut down of economies. In this context, due to their territorial grounding, public sectors will be essential in rebuilding efforts. From the perspective of water, its provision in sufficient quantity and high quality is not only essential to virtually every economic activities, it also supports local dynamism.

As opposed to larger multinationals, jobs in public water operators are local or national by nature: they are not delocalised, respond to local authorities and rely on the community's workforce. Therefore, supporting public water operators allows effectively creating and maintaining jobs in the EU, including administrative, engineering and on-the-ground technical jobs.

In parallel, we are now in a moment when operators are adapting to current and future challenges – including technological, climate and demographic – and these efforts open new employment and training opportunities to bridge related skills gaps in the long-term.

In addition, according to UN-Water[6], globally, “78 % of jobs constituting the global workforce are dependent on water”. In the EU, this translates into the provision of good quality water for people and businesses, but, looking beyond, public water operators also contribute to development by activating the local fabric of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in particular. The members of Aqua Publica Europea have in place investment plans to reinvest water revenue into the water cycle, focusing on infrastructure maintenance and update but also better access to water, innovation and the green transition. These investments often benefit local suppliers, construction firms and innovative start-ups to achieve the objectives.

**THE ROLE OF  
PERFORMANT  
PUBLIC WATER  
SERVICES IN  
TERRITORIAL  
DYNAMISM NEEDS  
TO BE  
ACKNOWLEDGED**



**VALORISING THE  
WATER SECTOR IS  
ESSENTIAL FOR  
ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT**

**THE MEMBERS OF AQUA  
PUBLICA EUROPEA  
PROVIDE**

**30.000+  
LOCAL 'GREEN' JOBS**

Furthermore, as a cultural heritage and part of territorial identities, water contributes to tourism. Quality water and sanitation are underlying preconditions to a thriving tourism industry. European examples such as the one of the Montenegrin coast becoming a dynamic zone following the development of a regional public water operator; or the water management in Paris being fully integrated in the city's project to permit swimming in the Seine river in view of the 2024 Olympics.

In all aspects of development, public water and sanitation services provide the necessary basis upon which to build strong economies in the long-term.

Therefore, investing in public water brings benefits for local businesses whilst contributing to EU dynamism.



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# 3

## TOWARDS A GREENER FUTURE, MORE RESPECTFUL OF OUR RESOURCES

The European Commission has made the ‘Green Deal’ its guiding compass for the next years, underlining the importance of moving towards growth that is greener and fairer and away from environmentally-destructive patterns. We are now at a pivotal moment to realise this ambition by supporting the sectors that are aligned with the paradigm shift. Choices need to be made and require political courage, but the members of Aqua Publica Europea are convinced of the opportunities to create a much more sustainable and more resilient framework.

This ambition is more relevant than ever as we exit the peak of the coronavirus crisis and enter summer with the foresight of yet another heatwave and drought period. The effects of climate change are already affecting us, which is why it is essential to ensure that the recovery takes into account climate and environment imperatives and prioritises sectors for which investments bring the double benefit of green economic growth.

A first step for a transition is to ensure the protection of water resources’ natural balance and quality, and therefore avoiding the subsidisation of the indus-

tries that pollute our heritage should be a prerequisite to EU action. The public water sector can also be instrumental in the transition. The members of Aqua Publica Europea, as public sector organisations, can play their part through green procurement, so that public money spent, at all levels, contributes to greater environmental and climate objectives and avoid negative consequences.

In addition, the thousands of jobs in the water sector – over 30.000 provided by Aqua Publica Europea’s members - are themselves “green” by ensuring the quality of natural resources and protection of the environment through good management of both freshwater and wastewater and, therefore, should be given importance as a contributing factor to achieve the ambitions of the Green Deal. But the public water sector also has the potential, with the right conditions in place, to contribute to objectives beyond water. Not only is quality drinking water an ecological beverage that contributes to reducing disposable plastic consumption, water management can also help achieve to EU targets for energy, circularity and climate adaptation, as well as the related economic benefits of this transition.

**EU NEEDS TO PRIORITISE SECTORS THAT HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO CONTRIBUTE TO ENVIRONMENTALLY-RESPECTFUL GROWTH, IN LINE WITH BOTH GREEN DEAL AND ECONOMIC IMPERATIVES.**

**INVESTMENTS IN THE PUBLIC WATER AND SANITATION SECTORS HAVE ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS REACHING BEYOND WATER ITSELF TO HELP ACHIEVE EU ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE OBJECTIVES.**

Taking into account planetary boundaries and our limited resources – either water itself or nutrients – is necessary for a more resilient and sustainable framework. From water reuse that considers the environment to the many opportunities for sludge, the by-product of waste water treatment, including energy or nutrient recovery, the water sector is critical in a true circular economy[7].

The water sector can be an actor in producing renewable energy thus contributing to EU climate and energy targets – Scottish Water is already generating more energy than it consumes and many operators have deployed solar panels on their installations. Furthermore, thermal energy can be recovered from wastewater and wastewater treatment, as is the case in Hamburg or in Brussels; and biogas can be produced from sludge.

Fully exploiting these opportunities and boosting energy or nutrient recovery further strategically increases European independence for resources whilst favouring territorial development in short-circuits and responding to local needs.

At the same time, the deployment of nature-based solutions in the context of water management, and in particular rainwater, has the potential to bring dynamism in construction sectors whilst, at the same time, supporting the development of more resilient cities and regions with sustainable solutions.

Therefore, investments in the public water sector have wide-ranging benefits for the planet and for a more respectful green growth.

**Europe is facing a new era and as we set the building blocks of the society and economy of tomorrow, the public water and sanitation sector has the potential to be a great ally which should be taken into consideration in recovery planning and investment. Quality water and performing services bring a vast array of positive outcomes – from socially fair to economically thriving communities.**

**The World Health Organisation's estimates highlight, globally, a gain of 1.5% of global GDP and a US\$ 4.3 return for every dollar invested in water and sanitation services[8]. Applied at EU level, the figures highlight important returns for investment in the European water and sanitation sector, concretely improving lives and supporting the economy.**

**Therefore, as we move forward, Aqua Publica Europea calls upon decision-makers to consider the role of public water operators throughout its upcoming recovery policies.**

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