

T9 • Water Governance: Cities, Basin Authorities, Participation & Stakeholders Commitment

1. BACKGROUND

The ongoing water insecurity in the Mediterranean cannot be understood in isolation from climate and environmental change. The region has already warmed about 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and is heating around 20% faster than the global average, with more frequent droughts, declining precipitation and longer dry spells now documented across many sub-regions. These trends have long ceased to be isolated shocks: they are structural pressures that are steadily reshaping the political, economic and territorial conditions in which cities, basins and stakeholders must operate.

In this context, water governance emerges as both a decisive fault line and a strategic lever for stability, determining whether communities adapt cooperatively to stress or are pushed into competition over an increasingly fragile resource. Cities concentrate demand, services and pollution loads, yet depend on resources managed at river-basin scale, where upstream and downstream users compete across agriculture, tourism, industry, energy and domestic uses. When responsibilities are fragmented across levels of government and sectors, and coordination between urban policies and basin management is weak, decision-making becomes siloed, efficiency drops and vulnerability to water-related risks increases.

The challenge is therefore no longer only how to mobilise more supply, but how to govern water better across cities, basins, utilities, productive sectors and ecosystems in ways that are integrated, resilient and fair. International frameworks such as SDG 6, the EU Water Framework Directive and global climate adaptation agendas already call for multi-level, participatory and integrated governance, yet translating these principles into practice remains difficult for many territories. Strengthening coordination mechanisms, clarifying mandates and investing in open data and shared monitoring systems are essential steps to move from fragmented responses to coherent strategies.

Stakeholder engagement is a critical dimension of this shift. Participatory governance is widely recognised as a cornerstone of effective water management, but too often remains confined to consultation rather than genuine co-management that incorporates local knowledge, civil society expertise and private-sector innovation. Taking care of water is possible: across the Mediterranean there are already cities, utilities and basin authorities demonstrating that better coordination, transparent information, citizen involvement and innovative tools can reduce losses, improve service and enhance resilience. Showcasing these working models and case studies is central to turning governance principles into tangible pathways that others can follow.

This high-level Panel is conceived as a space of hope grounded in evidence. By bringing together governments, cities, basin organisations, utilities, communities and experts, it aims to highlight concrete examples where integrated governance, stakeholder commitment and smart investments have delivered results, and to encourage their replication and adaptation across the Region. Rather than accepting water insecurity as inevitable, the Panel invites participants to treat successful case studies as proof that caring for water - through better governance, shared responsibility and practical tools - is not only necessary but achievable.

2. KEY CHALLENGES AND OBJECTIVES

Challenge 1 • Institutional fragmentation and overlapping mandates

Responsibilities for abstraction, allocation, distribution, wastewater, floods, environment and land use are spread across many ministries, municipalities, utilities and basin bodies, slowing decisions and blurring accountability, especially during prolonged crises.

Challenge 2 • Weak basin-city coordination

Urban water policies are set at municipal or utility level, while key pressures act at basin scale; without structured basin-city cooperation, resilience efforts remain partial and can shift risks to other territories or users.

Challenge 3 • Limited participation and trust deficits

When communities, users, businesses and civil society are involved late or only formally, decisions become conflictual; meaningful participation needs time, information and real influence, otherwise it deepens mistrust.

Challenge 4 • Data asymmetry and information gaps

Shared, accessible data on availability, quality, uses, losses and risks are often missing, weakening evidence-based decisions, reinforcing power imbalances and making progress hard to track.

Challenge 5 • Uneven technical and financial capacity

Small municipalities, local utilities and community organisations lack resources to engage in planning, regulation and complex partnerships, limiting their influence and slowing uptake of innovative solutions.

Challenge 6 • Social equity and affordability pressures

Reforms on efficiency, cost-recovery or reallocation are contested if they ignore affordability, territorial disparities and vulnerable groups, especially when tariffs, subsidies and service quality are not clearly communicated.

Challenge 7 • Integrating climate adaptation and long-term resilience

Governance frameworks designed for more stable climates struggle with frequent extremes; embedding climate risk and nature-based solutions demands new tools, partnerships and flexible, learning-oriented regulation.

This Panel will examine how better water governance can connect cities, basin authorities, utilities, civil society and major water users to strengthen resilience across the Mediterranean. It will move beyond infrastructure only approaches, focusing instead on institutional arrangements, participation mechanisms and stakeholder commitments that treat water as a shared strategic resource rather than a narrow sectoral issue.

In particular, the Panel will:

- highlight why cities cannot secure water resilience without stronger coordination with basin scale institutions and upstream stakeholders, and how this coordination can be organised in practice through compacts, joint planning or shared monitoring;
- explore how basin authorities, municipalities and utilities can improve joint planning, data sharing, crisis response and investment decisions to manage scarcity, floods and pollution, including through integrated water resources management and multi level governance frameworks;
- discuss how public participation and stakeholder engagement - drawing on Mediterranean experiences - can increase legitimacy, reduce conflict and improve implementation of difficult water decisions, from allocation changes to tariff reforms;
- showcase practical examples of collaborative governance, including urban-rural compacts, multi stakeholder platforms, participatory river basin planning, civil society monitoring initiatives and city to city or basin to basin cooperation;
- strengthen dialogue between governments, local authorities, utilities, investors, researchers and civil society on governance models fit for a water stressed Mediterranean and aligned with broader regional cooperation frameworks and climate adaptation agendas.

3. GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What must change in institutional design, legal frameworks and political practice for water governance in the Mediterranean to shift from fragmented mandates to coordinated, basin-based and city-sensitive decision-making?
- How can cities, utilities and basin authorities share responsibilities, data and investment priorities more effectively, especially under drought, flood and climate-stress scenarios?
- What forms of participation - such as stakeholder platforms, citizen observatories or co-designed basin plans - have proved most effective in improving water governance outcomes, and how can they move from consultation to shared responsibility and long-term commitment?
- How should governance systems balance efficiency, environmental protection, affordability, territorial equity and economic development when allocating water in increasingly stressed regions?
- Which governance innovations, regulatory tools or institutional partnerships (for example, metropolitan compacts, performance-based contracts, or basin-wide monitoring protocols) show promise for building trust and accountability among diverse users?
- How can regional cooperation platforms support peer learning, capacity-building and the diffusion of good practices in participatory water governance among Mediterranean cities and basins?

4. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The expected results of this Panel include an increased understanding of the challenges associated with integrated water governance, enabling stakeholders to better navigate the complex institutional and territorial dynamics that shape water management across the Mediterranean. It will also facilitate the identification of good practices and replicable governance models - drawn from concrete experiences of city-basin coordination, multi-stakeholder agreements, participatory monitoring and basin-wide planning - that can be adapted across different national and territorial contexts.

Furthermore, the process is expected to strengthen dialogue and collaboration between cities, basin authorities and a wide range of stakeholders, fostering more inclusive and coordinated decision making. Attention will be given to models where co management, open data and multi level cooperation have produced measurable results for both institutions and communities. Ultimately, these outcomes will contribute to the development of policy relevant recommendations aimed at improving governance frameworks, enhancing coordination and promoting meaningful participation in water management process.