

# YOUTH WATER COOPERATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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## Introduction

The Mediterranean region faces considerable challenges, including the effects of climate change, imbalance of water distribution and water insecurity, in particular in the Southern Mediterranean countries (Zdruli, 2012). The increased water scarcity has a significant political and socioeconomic impact on the region. In addition, water scarcity exacerbates the effects of growing poverty, deterioration of health, unemployment, and mass displacement that creates large refugee populations. The Mediterranean region, however, is rich in its young population, who have played – and continue to play – an active role in the fields of water security and development of better water awareness at both the local and national levels.

Youths represent more than half of the population of the southern shore of the Mediterranean and thus are extremely important in the development of the region. Within the context of the current water challenges in the Mediterranean region, young people are making a difference by adopting innovative solutions to water issues and raising awareness on issues related to climate change, water management and nature-based solutions for water issues in the region. This section of the population is an important agent for change, not as the next generation or future leaders, as they are often described, but as a generation currently and vitally active today and as effective contemporary leaders whose access to decision-makers and implementers can lead to further stability in the water sectors in the Mediterranean.

Their activism, practical initiatives and innovative ideas should be acknowledged, shared and replicated to create a more secure regional water future. Young water professionals,

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nonetheless, face several challenges to achieve full recognition at the policy level. Policy-making, including in the water sector, is dominated by an older generation of elites who are out of touch with the aspirations and needs of today's youths.

On the assumption that safe and clean drinking water and sanitation are human rights, essential for the full enjoyment of other human rights, the present policy brief will look at why youths' involvement in the water sector is essential for sustainable development in the Mediterranean. Driven by the experience of the author as a young Southern Mediterranean researcher and taking into account her background in water and migration research, the arguments defended in the article aim to highlight the importance of youths collaborating in the Mediterranean.

This policy brief first looks at water issues within the Mediterranean with a special focus on water as a human right. Subsequently, it maps the challenges faced by young water professionals and provides some insights into how the potential of young experts could be further boosted. The findings in this part are based on a survey conducted by the author among 20 young water professionals. The last part provides recommendations on ways to further improve young people's engagement and participation in water solutions, as well as their access to policy-making platforms.

### **Water as a Human Right on the Global Development Agenda**

On 28 July 2010, by adopting Resolution 64/292, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) acknowledged access to water and sanitation as a human right. The Resolution pledged states and international organisations to contribute financially and foster capacity-building and technology transfer to assist states in need in ensuring safe, clean, accessible and affordable drinking water and sanitation for all (United Nations [UN], 2014).

Further, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted in 2015 highlighted the need to provide sustainable management of water and sanitation at the highest level (Sustainable Development Goal [SGD] 6) (UN, 2018). Water sustainability may help achieve other sustainable goals such as ending all forms of poverty and hunger, fighting inequalities, ensuring peace and stability, preserving ecosystems and biodiversity, and achieving energy and food security.

Despite the recognition of water as the core of sustainable development and its importance for socioeconomic development and human existence, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2017) report estimates that over 2 billion people across the globe do not have access to safely managed drinking water services, whereas 4.5 billion people lack safely managed sanitation services. As the population increases, so do water scarcity concerns. Therefore, control of water resources and water management

should be further tightened. Having access to clean water and adequate sanitation facilities is crucial to ensuring human dignity and safety.

In 2018, the European Union (EU) Council adopted conclusions on Water Diplomacy (13991), acknowledging that water scarcity may affect peace and security and committing to fostering water security by strengthening local governments and promoting regional water agreements. According to the resolution, multilateral cooperation is a sine qua non condition for effective transboundary water management (Council of the European Union, 2018).

The aforementioned resolutions and goals are highly relevant in developing a sustainable water agenda. However, in many countries, significant obstacles remain: firstly, lack of data and knowledge on how water scarcity and climate change will affect the water-dependent services, water quality, aquatic ecosystems and groundwater conditions, and, secondly, failure to engage the younger generation as part of the solution to water issues, in particular in the Mediterranean region.

The lack of engagement of youths in the water sector, especially at the policy level, is part of a greater marginalisation that this generation faces in the region across the board where governance and youth policies fail to involve young people, in particular at the decision-making levels.

### **Youth Participation in the Water Sector in the South Mediterranean: Mapping the Challenges**

For the purpose of this brief, 20 young water professionals were surveyed in order to map the challenges they face herewith. The participating sample was divided equally between male and female participants the majority of whom were from Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, and Morocco. The ages of participants ranged from 23 to 33. The participants in the study varied in educational backgrounds and employment status.<sup>1</sup>

Among the biggest challenges identified was limited (or no access to) financial capital. Indeed, over 70% of respondents stated that they had limited control over the funding of the projects they work on or that the financial assets were managed directly by their supervisors. Limited (or no access to) decision-making was equally indicated as one of the biggest constraints. 60% of the surveyed youths said they were often excluded from consultation processes or management positions by their employers. Restricted

<sup>1</sup> Most of the participants were employed for a wage (50%), whilst the rest were self-employed (20%), higher education students (20%) and unemployed/searching for jobs (10%). The majority of the participants worked in research institutions or university (40%), followed by governmental institution (25%), private business (20%), youth associations (10%) and self-employed/entrepreneurs (5%).

national and international mobility was also pinpointed by the majority of the respondents, who referred mainly to difficulties in obtaining work permits and visas, leading many of them to lose valuable training and work exchange opportunities.

Lack of engagement of youths in policy dialogue around water was also noted. Indeed, as observed by the respondents, regional and national dialogue around water issues rarely includes youth representation and their voices are often disregarded by policy-makers. Another constraint identified was restricted or no access to research institutions and the academic water sector either for financial reasons or due to the limitations of water research in the countries of the respondents.

One third of surveyed youths admitted having faced administrative problems, such as excessive bureaucracy and mismanagement. Although the majority of those surveyed are employed, some of the respondents observed that the available job opportunities within their countries were not suited to their expertise, that they rarely received guidance on labour demands and that there were very few, if any, facilities that encourage entrepreneurship in the water sector.

The challenges faced by young water professionals, which could also relate to youths working in other sectors, hinder their participation in water management within their communities and hamper their aspiration to reach their potential as change makers within the water sector. Although the challenges are almost evenly described by male and female respondents, it is females that seem to carry the greater burden within the water sector.

In their responses, young women believed that they faced additional challenges due to their gender including sexism, harassment and patriarchy in the workplace. Female respondents also stated limited accessibility to information and decision-making and lack of appointments to higher positions, despite their qualifications.

In total, 80% of the female respondents and 20% of the male respondents stated being subjected to mistreatment in their work or by their educational supervisor. "Mistreatment of young researchers is quite generalised in the academic world," one respondent said, who could not become the main coordinator of research projects during her PhD studies, even though she was the one managing and implementing the project (in addition to being highly qualified and getting funding for the project in the first place). Instead, her supervisor was responsible for the project and got all the recognition. Another female water professional stressed that, although she wrote the proposal and secured the funding for the project under which she is employed, her male supervisor was the actual financial manager of the project, receiving a higher payment, but doing less in terms of the project management and implementation.

These types of management issues and limitations end up abusing and hindering early career researchers and young water professionals.

### **Maximising the Potential of Young Water Professionals**

In light of the aforementioned challenges facing young water professionals, the respondents stressed the importance of improving the work and education conditions for young people in the region in order to maximise those youths' potential and their successful participation as a moving force for better water management.

Providing technical and financial support in the water sector was judged as crucial to develop the skills of youths and their potential for better work opportunities. Half of the respondents noted the importance of providing platforms (both online and face-to-face) where youths could share their experiences, develop partnerships and exchange ideas. Surveyed professionals stressed the need to increasingly involve youths at the policy-making levels both nationally and regionally in regards to water management.

The development of mentoring programmes for youths, where more experienced water professionals would support younger ones, was deemed equally important. Less than half of respondents identified the need to restructure the water sector in their countries to be made more receptive to youths and more gender sensitive. Exchange and promotion of success stories of youths working in the water sector as motivation for marginalised youths in the water sectors was also considered relevant.

On the positive side, surveyed youths stated that they often had access to skills development mostly due to their own motivation to learn but also as part of their active involvement in local and regional youth networks. Respondents identified a range of regional and international organisations actively engaging youths in their programmes either in the form of educational workshops or conferences or training and project-implementation.<sup>2</sup> The respondents also pinpointed the existence of different water networks in the Mediterranean region, including local water parliaments for youths, water and irrigation networks, as well as young water professionals' networks, such as the Mediterranean Youth for Water Network (MedYWat).

The role of MedYWat, a network launched in April 2018 and bringing together young Mediterranean water professionals aged between 18 and 35 in contributing to water solutions in the Mediterranean was particularly stressed. MedYWat recognises the role of

<sup>2</sup> Among the institutions and organisations identified, the principal ones were Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Middle East Desalination Research Center, Centre international de hautes études agronomiques méditerranéennes (CIHEAM) Bari, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, German Corporation for International Cooperation GmbH (GIZ), European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), Center for Mediterranean Integration (CMI) and CEWAS.

youths as focal points in knowledge production about water issues and engaging youths in working on stressing water-related issues in the region, including water education, water governance and green entrepreneurship. In 2019, for instance, MedYWat members, under the supervision and support of the Center for Mediterranean Integration (CMI), led a series of five working papers on water and migration, in preparation for the yearly World Water Day events. A total of 15 water professionals worked on producing the five papers and were supervised and mentored by senior experts in water policy and research. The papers covered a range of topics including the impact of the refugee discourse on water governance in Lebanon and Jordan, the impact of the Wall on water access and human migration in Palestine, the Water-Migration Nexus, as well as solutions for water and migration in the Mediterranean. Another example of supporting the initiatives of young water professionals mentioned by some of the respondents was the “Mediterranean Water Heroes” youth contest, which provides water professionals with the opportunity to showcase their innovative work on water issues in the Mediterranean.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The shared concerns over water stress in the Mediterranean region and the current problems associated with it create a crucial need for regional partnerships and cooperation. Within the region, youths are important agents, who can contribute to regional water security and increased water awareness. Youths actively participate in innovative water-related projects and research across the Euro-Mediterranean region. However, they continue to struggle to find space for their voice to be heard and their role is often underestimated by older members of their fields of work. Therefore, improving youth participation in the decision-making and boosting collaboration among the youths of the Mediterranean can lead to greater resilience of not only water sectors but the ecosystems of the region in general. However, for that to become a reality, not just an aspiration, the tools, methods, finance mechanisms and opportunities for leadership should be available for them now.

Access to safe and clean drinking water is a basic human right that needs well-planned and implemented water management schemes and technical solutions in which youths can play a central role. To boost youth engagement and participation in water solutions, efforts to deal with water issues in the Mediterranean should address the following:

- 1. Adaptation and development of national and sub-national strategies:** ensuring safe access to water and water management relies greatly on knowledge of water technologies, testing water quality, and developing methods to deal with droughts and other challenges. To ensure the availability of such solutions, there is a need to update existing national and local water strategies (as well as climate strategies), incorporating findings of research conducted by youths locally and nationally and solutions developed by youths across the region. Further, new water strategies should be developed in countries where they are clearly not in place and made inclusive and responsive to the needs of youths.

- 2. Establishing/strengthening youth collaboration with authorities:** for youth-led solutions to be successful there is a need for an effective and efficient governance structure. Therefore, local, national and regional multi-level mechanisms should be established to foster closer dialogue and collaboration between governments, ministries of environment/climate, water, energy, agriculture, and planning with young water professionals. Institutions that are active in the water sector such as the EU and other actors can contribute to the implementation of those mechanisms. Securing water for communities, economies and the region in general is critical to ensure a sustainable future. Therefore, it is essential to see the involvement of youths at all levels, especially in leadership positions that have to do with water management, policy-making and governance.
- 3. National and regional youth-led capacity-building:** in order to strengthen the capacity to monitor and manage water, it is important to build the capacities of local communities as well as young water professionals. Considering that the young water professionals identified as a challenge their lack of recognition due to their age despite their knowledge and qualifications, capacity-building activities, such as training, could be led by young water professionals. Governmental institutions, international agencies and organisations working on water issues should provide platforms for youths where they could lead capacity-building initiatives in the water sector.
- 4. Support of young water professionals in academia:** considering that most of the surveyed youths working in academia said that they suffered from discrimination and underestimation of their research, there is a need for greater support for researchers to conduct research on needed topics, such as water and migration. This can materialise in the form of research grants directed towards young water professionals and regional collaboration or mentoring programmes where more experienced senior researchers guide and support the work of young water professionals.
- 5. Promoting and supporting collaborative projects:** as the surveyed youths emphasised, regional collaboration among water professionals and greater support for such collaboration at both financial and technical levels would be valuable for them. Boosting collaboration in the water sector could also increase job opportunities for youths and help solve the issue of unemployment.

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