Strengthening water and sanitation regulatory systems

Achieving universal and resilient services through strengthened regulation

If the world is to stem the water and sanitation crisis, there is not a moment to lose. In 2025, with only five years to go until the deadline for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 2 billion people still lack access to safe drinking water and 3.5 billion – almost half the world's population – still depend on sanitation services that leave human waste inadequately treated, resulting in 1.4 million deaths annually. Climate change, water scarcity, new pollutants, rapid urbanization, economic volatility, migrations, increasing levels of conflict and other pressures are intensifying this crisis.

There is wide consensus that effective regulatory systems – including setting legally binding standards, norms and good practices, governance frameworks, accountability (both internal and external), enforcement mechanisms and adequate resourcing – are fundamental to service improvement, sustainability and resilience, especially during emergencies and humanitarian contexts. Countries with well-resourced and functional regulatory systems are more likely to make progress towards their national drinking-water and sanitation targets (GLAAS 2022).

Water and sanitation regulation lies at the heart of delivering continuous, safe, affordable and sustainable access to services, improving public health, protecting the environment, fostering gender equality and bridging service gaps for the underserved and unserved populations, including informal settlements, marginalized communities and off-grid service systems. Strengthened regulatory systems provide the bedrock for accountability among governments, regulators, autonomous service providers and, most importantly, the people in need of services.

This Call to Action urges all stakeholders to help strengthen the enabling environment for water and sanitation regulation, support the creation or reinforcement of regional regulatory associations, advance regulation nationally through defined road maps, adopt context-appropriate regulatory models, prioritize underserved populations, establish robust financing mechanisms gradually freed from traditional official development assistance (ODA), and leverage targeted and better-coordinated support from external partners. While regulatory frameworks are sometimes perceived as bureaucratic barriers, well-designed and adaptive regulation is, in fact, a key enabler of economic stability, public health protection and service efficiency.

The key strategic actors

- **Governments and planning authorities** should not only take the lead in advocating for reinforcing regulation and aligning related policy frameworks, but also ensure that, in line with this, essential financial and human resources are allocated to regulatory bodies.

- **Legislators (e.g. parliamentarians)** will have to play a constructive and proactive role in shaping adequate legal structures. These should ensure that regulators can operate autonomously and that there is effective oversight of service providers' performance.

- **Multilateral development banks** should make it standard procedure that, in negotiations between task managers and client countries about support for water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) projects, the strengthening of WASH regulatory frameworks is adequately addressed.

- **Philanthropic organizations, professional associations and civil society organizations** should provide expertise, resources, advocacy and awareness-raising efforts in support of improved WASH regulatory frameworks.

- **Regional associations of regulators** should share experiences and provide evidence; based on this, further strengthening of regulations can be pursued.

Regional associations of regulators have a central role in addressing these challenges, providing platforms for best practices and capacity-building and encouraging governments to prioritize regulation in their development agendas. These associations also play a vital role in pooling resources – such as technical expertise, funding and regulatory tools – and redistributing them to support less-resourced members, fostering equitable capacity-building across regions. The success of associations in Africa, Latin America and Europe offers valuable lessons that can support similar initiatives in Asia and the Middle East.

At the 2023 and 2024 meetings of the WHO-hosted International Network of Drinking-water and Sanitation Regulators (RegNet), and at the 2023 International Water Association (IWA) International Water Regulators Forum, regulators from over 40 countries and concerned stakeholders from around the world expressed their vision of what an enabling regulatory environment looks like. To move from commitment to action, they recommend that regulation benefit from the highest level of political commitment, and that countries develop detailed, measurable and incrementally achievable road maps for regulators. This will lead to enabling environments that empower regulatory institutions to deliver the full range of benefits of effective regulation.

Therefore, the aforementioned key strategic actors and all other stakeholders should:

- **demonstrate** true resolve to empower regulatory institutions, so they can function effectively within the provisions established by law;

- **establish** strong sector governance with clear policy, legal and institutional frameworks, as the bedrock of effective regulation;

- **develop** sustainable financing and investment mechanisms to ensure long-term viability of well-regulated water and sanitation services, with tools such as payment for ecosystem services (PES) serving as complementary approaches to support natural resource protection;

- **implement** mechanisms for ensuring transparency and accountability across all regulatory and operational activities;

- **ensure** that regulatory and service delivery frameworks explicitly address the needs of underserved populations;

- **empower** regulatory institutions to adopt a responsive regulation approach that aligns with social, economic and normative motives for compliance;

- **prioritize** human resource development to enable regulatory institutions to incrementally build a skilled human resource base through peer-to-peer learning, exchanges with more-mature regulatory entities, skills development, training programmes and technical assistance;

- **build** robust regulatory assessment systems for monitoring and reporting to ensure data-driven decision-making and adaptive management;

- **institutionalize** meaningful stakeholder and consumer participation in public service provision, by establishing robust platforms for engagement and feedback;

- **establish** regional associations of regulators in regions where these do not yet exist.

An effective enabling environment allows countries to adopt regulatory arrangements that are fit for purpose in the local context. Many countries use a mixed approach, combining models such as regulation by agency, contracts, ministerial regulation and self-regulation. These arrangements address economic, service quality, health and safety, environmental, social, technical and contractual dimensions. They aim to ensure universal and equitable access to services, prioritize marginalized groups, protect public health and the environment through enforceable standards, support affordability and fair pricing, ensure reliable service delivery and foster resilience to shocks. Transparency and accountability, sustainable financing and stakeholder engagement are central to these systems, enabling continuous improvement and innovation. Robust mechanisms for dialogue, monitoring and enforcement further uphold standards and address non-compliance, while recognizing the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation as adopted by the UN General Assembly in July 2010.

CALL TO ACTION

To stem the global water and sanitation crisis, there is not a moment to lose. Strengthened regulatory systems are essential to delivering safe, affordable and sustainable water and sanitation services, protecting public health and fostering resilience against mounting challenges such as climate change and rapid urbanization. We urge governments, regulators and all stakeholders to prioritize robust governance frameworks, allocate essential resources and establish transparent and accountable mechanisms. By advancing regional regulatory associations, fostering stakeholder engagement and adopting sustainable financing solutions, we can build an enabling environment that ensures universal and inclusive access to equitable services and safeguards the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation. The world cannot wait – let's move from commitment to action.