

# Improving regulation of water and sanitation services in Syria

Policy Brief



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# The importance of regulation and accountability in the Syrian context

Following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Syria entered a transitional phase where national institutions are regaining their central role in rebuilding the country’s water and sanitation systems.

The main challenges stem from the extensive damage to infrastructure, ongoing government restructuring, and the severe loss of human and material capacity after more than a decade of conflict. Additional difficulties include transitioning from outdated procedures to modern, transparent ones and the constraints imposed by ongoing economic sanctions. Nevertheless, significant opportunities exist. There is a clear readiness within national institutions to engage constructively with different stakeholders in advancing water and sanitation services. In addition, there is a strong determination to move forward, supported by the fact that pre-conflict institutional capacity and service standards were high, setting an ambitious benchmark for recovery and improvement.

Within this context, local governments remain the backbone of service delivery. Water and sanitation

systems are ultimately managed at municipal and district levels—through utilities, local councils, NGOs, private operators, and community-based providers—where the daily needs of households, displaced populations, and vulnerable groups are most directly met. Strengthening the governance of water and sanitation services alongside national frameworks is therefore not a duplication of efforts, but an urgent necessity.

Effective local governance also relies on strong community engagement. Reinforcing the relationship between institutions and communities is essential to ensure mutual accountability, responsive service delivery, and continuous feedback that supports institutional reform and improved performance.

Against this backdrop, this policy brief presents the findings of a structured research and dialogue process on water governance in Ex-North-West Syria, and highlights how these lessons can contribute to the broader national reform agenda.

## The research and stakeholder consultation process

As part of the “Enhancing Institutional Performance for Improved WASH Services in Idleb Governorate,” project, funded by the Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF) and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), a comprehensive consultation and multi-stakeholder exercise on regulatory strengthening was designed and implemented in collaboration with the authorities of Idleb Governorate, between December 2024 and November 2025.

The process was led through the Subnational WASH Sector Coordination Group for Idleb and Aleppo Governorates (previously WASH Cluster for North-West Syria) and facilitated by IVL Swedish Environmental Research Institute.

The objective of this process was to analyse the existing regulatory framework and identify concrete regulatory actions aimed at improving the quality, efficiency, and sustainability of water and sanitation service delivery. Discussions were structured around three key regulatory dimensions: (i) service quality, (ii) economic efficiency and tariff setting, and (iii) public health and environmental protection.

In preparation for this regulatory analysis, IVL conducted an extensive literature review, interviewed key experts, and held a series of consultations and meetings with the water institutions and international partners to identify priority areas for the analysis. The preparatory work included a review of the Syrian water regulatory context, as well as an in-depth assessment of service delivery in Idleb, covering service quality and public health and environmental regulatory aspects.

This consultative process culminated in regulatory assessment workshop, which took place in Idleb from 22 to 24 September 2025, bringing together 30 participants from the Idleb Water Institution and its branches in Ariha, Al-Danaand Ma’arrat Misrin , private water operators, representatives of the WASH Sector Coordination Group, UN and international agencies, NGOs, as well as public-sector actors including the Health Directorate and the Directorate of Water Resources in Idleb.





## Priority areas for action

Current service provision in areas under reconstruction is fragmented, delivered through a mix of actors, such as the Water Establishments, humanitarian NGOs, community and voluntary initiatives, and private operators. As a result, the quality of services received by Syrian citizens varies widely, particularly since many providers are neither formally registered nor regulated. Tariffs also differ significantly: water may be provided free of charge by NGOs, offered at a flat monthly rate, billed according to metered consumption, or purchased at highly volatile prices from water truckers. Water quality monitoring remains limited, and institutional capacity to oversee wastewater discharges, prevent illegal water abstraction, and control environmental pollution is extremely weak.

As Syria continues to rebuild and reorganize its public service structures, adopting structured regulation will be essential for promoting sustainable service delivery, protecting consumers, and building trust between institutions and communities.

Hence the overall **priority areas for service quality** are:

- **Establishing clear and measurable service level standards and indicators.** Service quality standards are fundamental to ensuring equitable access to safe and reliable water and sanitation services. The process to establish them must incorporate the actual reality of service delivery and deteriorated infrastructure. It needs to set

realistic targets that can be monitored over time, incorporate the different service provision modalities, be participatory, and grounded in clear performance indicators.

- **Monitoring service levels and coverage targets to assess compliance.** The establishment of data collection and monitoring systems would accompany the previous measure, which would allow to start understanding the key parameters of service delivery in the different governorates. This is followed by restoring law-enforcement mechanisms, including incentive and penalty system.
- **Produce public benchmarking reports to encourage transparency and accountability.** Rebuilding trust by explaining the status of services, the challenges and the improvements is critical for community engagement and acceptance of future reforms.
- **Standardize capacity-building programmes and professional competencies across Water Units.** To address the shortage of qualified staff and the wide variation in experience, it is recommended to establish a national, standardized capacity-building programme that defines core competencies for each position, provides unified training modules, and introduces common certification requirements. This approach will help harmonize skill levels, improve service quality, and reduce performance disparities across Water Units.



The current situation of water infrastructure requires additional financial resources to fund the necessary maintenance and rehabilitation. However, the deteriorated quality of services together with the poverty level of many Syrians make a tariff reform difficult at this point of time. Instead, there are some elements that should be prioritized to **improve the financial situation** of the water sector:

- **Improve metering and tariff collection mechanisms.** Harmonizing the price paid for water across consumers is essential, given the significant disparities between neighbouring households served by different providers. Expanding meter installation for all connected households is a critical first step, as multiple tariff models currently coexist due to the lack of reliable consumption data. Introducing electronic billing systems, integrating payment platforms across public utilities, and enabling citizens to track their consumption and payments will further strengthen transparency, fairness, and revenue collection.
- **Assess cost-reduction measures, including urgent network rehabilitation, increased use of alternative energy sources, equipment replacement, and addressing organizational inefficiencies.** Physical water losses across the network are estimated to be substantial—exceeding 50% in some areas. Many pumps and related equipment are outdated, energy-intensive, and inefficient. A prioritized rehabilitation and replacement plan should therefore be developed to reduce both operational costs and service losses. Additionally, the internal organization of the water establishments should be reviewed to identify structural gaps and opportunities for improved efficiency.
- **Increase Accountability.** Creating accessible institutional websites that provide information about the water service, developing user friendly complaint mechanisms, and allowing for spaces for interaction (public hearings, community meetings) is as important as infrastructure investments.
- **Review the use of subsidies and identify optimal tariff structures.** It is increasingly important to harmonize tariff-setting procedures and to gain a clear understanding of how subsidies flow into the sector, how they are used, and how they can be better aligned with the most urgent needs, particularly of the most vulnerable populations.

Public health and environmental protection are mutually reinforcing. Strengthening their regulation in Syria will contribute not only to better service quality but also to broader goals of public health, environmental resilience, and social stability. While full-scale enforcement may be challenging under current conditions, practical steps can lay the groundwork for a more formal environmental regulatory system in the future.

The **key priorities in public health and environment** include:

- **Regulate private service provision:** Establish registry procedures, and operational standards for private water suppliers, such as water truckers and borehole drilling companies. Develop licensing, inspections, and compliance monitoring, and ensure strong supplier awareness so that private sector participation in water service delivery remains fair, safe, and properly regulated during the transition.
- **Regulate Groundwater use:** Updating existing groundwater abstraction registries and monitoring new abstractions. Assessment of the status and modelling of strategic aquifers will be needed to allow for sustainable management and avoid overuse and pollution. Community awareness and engagement will also be critical for a more sustainable use of the resource.
- **Develop a sanitation and wastewater treatment strategic plan:** including the priority rehabilitation and new construction of wastewater treatment plants needed, developing business and regulatory models for energy and resources re-use, while also integrating off grid sanitation management into the regulatory cycle.
- **Adopt climate risk informed water and sanitation safety planning,** which would then allow a proactive risk management approach while also improving the water and wastewater quality testing capacities at various levels.

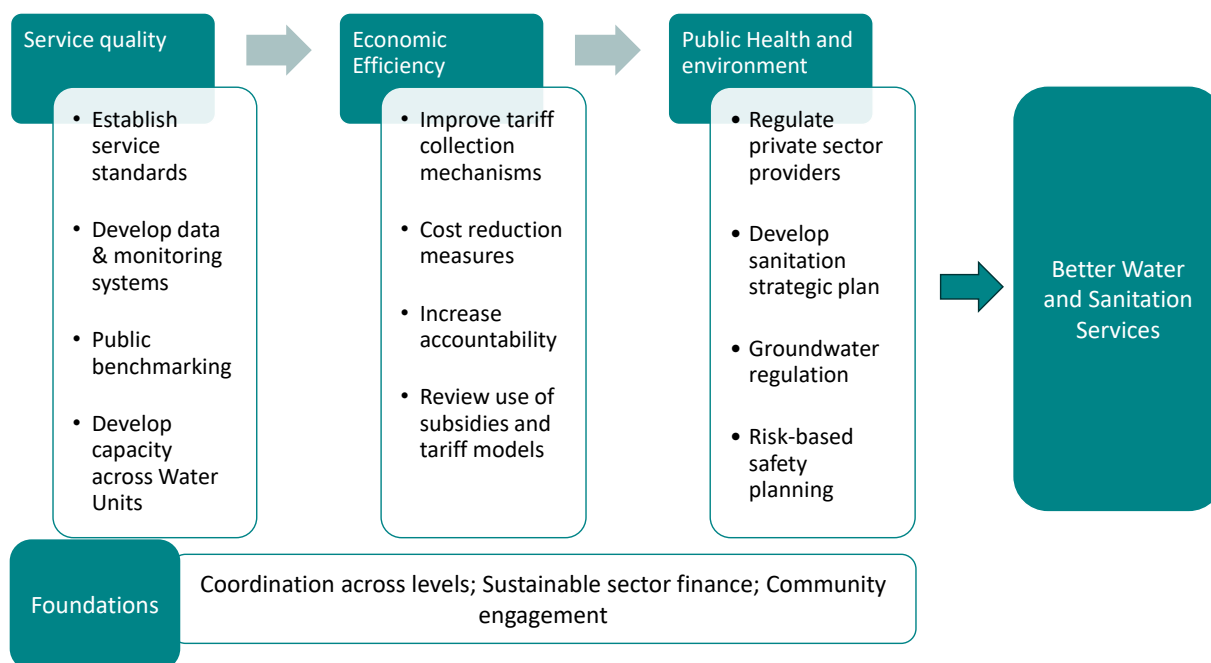


In addition to the priorities across these three areas of regulation, there are **foundational actions** that require specific attention:

- **Coordination across levels:** The scale of the ongoing reforms will require strong direction and well-functioning coordination mechanisms between central and subnational levels. It will also depend on sustained dialogue to bring forward bottom-up priorities and to strengthen peer-to-peer learning across different parts of the country.
- **Sustainable Sector Finance:** External support is required to undertake large-scale rehabilitation works, but such investments must be closely aligned with improvements in cost efficiency, service quality, and institutional accountability.

Developing a long-term plan for a financially sustainable water sector—supported by clear, measurable milestones—would help create the predictability and confidence needed to attract greater commercial investment in both water and wastewater services.

- **Community engagement and awareness:** A wide range of social communication strategies will be required, in relation to rational use of water, the water services, as well as aspects related to public health, - hygiene- and environmental aspects- water conservation, water reuse, and others. This is a society wide effort, engaging schools, households, and community leaders, to build collective responsibility for water use, safety and environmental protection.



# Next steps: towards national water sector renewal

Overall, the water and sanitation services in Syria require the combination of operational improvements with long-term resilience goals. Modernization and accountability must serve as central drivers for achieving equitable, efficient, and sustainable water management in post-crisis Syria. Moving forward, **scaling up regulatory practices** across governorates and progressively at the national level, starting with pragmatic actions at local scales is essential.

Even though baselines and targets are tailored to the situation in each governorate, methodologies and processes piloted at the subnational level—and proven to be good practices—can inform national efforts and support successful standardization across the country. Strengthened **coordination across regulatory** agencies will ensure effective collaboration between public health authorities, environmental agencies, and humanitarian actors.

**Data collection and transparency** must form the foundation for robust monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.

**Learning and exchange**, drawing from international best practices while ensuring that regulatory reforms remain firmly grounded in Syrian institutional and operational realities, will ensure a process of adaptation and continuous improvement. ■

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