

EQUITABLE ACCESS COUNTRY HIGHLIGHTS: FRANCE

SECTION I: COUNTRY SETTING

Basic information

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| POPULATION | 67.12 million (2017) |
| AREA | 643,801 km ² |
| GDP | US\$ 2,582.5 billion |
| GDP PER CAPITA | US\$ 38,476 |
| ACCESS TO DRINKING WATER | Total: 100% Urban: 100% Rural: 100% |
| ACCESS TO SANITATION | Total: 97% Urban: 97% Rural: 96% |

Protocol on Water and Health. France became a Party in May 2005. Since then, it has consistently served as lead Party for activities on equitable access to water and sanitation under the Protocol.

Water and sanitation sector. Responsibilities are shared between national authorities and local entities. The main ministries involved are the Ministry for Solidarity and Health and the Ministry of the Ecological and Inclusive Transition. In addition, the ministries of the Interior, Economy and Finance, and the Overseas are involved on subjects linked to public services for water and sanitation. In addition, six water agencies are public institutions with administrative and financing functions, managing water resources by basin and watersheds under the supervision of the Ministry of the Ecological and Inclusive Transition. At the local level, municipalities or inter-municipalities are responsible for the water supply and wastewater treatment. They also deal with the implementation of social policy, as approved by the municipal council, and the delivery of social aids. The departments oversee aspects of social policy as well as being in charge of social solidarity funds together with the State, and they are also responsible for housing planning for disadvantaged people.

The self-assessment focused on the Greater Paris urban area, i.e. Paris and three surrounding departments of Hauts-de-Seine, Seine-Saint-Denis and Val-de-Marne whose responsibilities are shared as follows. The City of Paris and its operator Eau de Paris are in charge of water delivery and wastewater collection. The Paris urban area wastewater treatment authority (SIAAP) is responsible for wastewater purification. In 2019, the Water Union of Ile-de-France (SEDIF) produces and delivers drinking water for 4.6 million inhabitants in 150 municipalities and seven departments.

Section II: Self-assessment of equitable access to water and sanitation

II.A. Key findings²³

Governance framework. It was found that frameworks to deliver equitable access are in place. The national legislation enshrines legal provisions on public participation and information, and recognizes the right of everyone to access drinking water for food and hygiene use under conditions that are economically acceptable to all. There are also specific funds and preventive and remedial measures aimed at helping the most economically disadvantaged users.

Geographical disparities. It was generally found that the level of access is high: the connection rate to water and sanitation grids is more than 99 per cent. The main disparity identified was attributed to slums and informal settlements in Ile-de-France. In this regard, results showed that there are no specific public policies in place to support the delivery of water and sanitation services in these areas with solutions implemented on an ad hoc basis. Geographical disparities in terms of prices exist; the average price for water and sanitation varies in every city and there are no tools or indicators to precisely monitor the costs of provision and how to connect this to the price paid by consumers. However, public indicators are available thanks to the Observatory on public water and sanitation services. Besides, the quality of water in the Greater Paris area is good. In France in 2017, 97.8 per cent of the population were supplied with water that consistently complied with the quality limits set by regulations for microbiological parameters (data from the Ministry for Solidarity and Health).

²³ For more information on the findings of the self-assessment of equitable access to water and sanitation, see the country report available at <https://bit.ly/2lVKVEI>

Vulnerable and marginalized groups. Access to water and sanitation is linked to housing, which explains the key difficulties for certain categories of users, namely nomadic populations and homeless people. Even though some of their needs are addressed through national sector policies and within the performance contract of water operators (e.g. it may include the provision of municipal equipment, such as public fountains), significant challenges remain. According to the NGO Fondation Abbé Pierre, 140,000 homeless people did not have access to drinking water in France in 2013. In Paris, a major information campaign by the water operator was conducted in 2018 on various actions to access water, including the provision and maintenance of 1,200 self-service water fountains, with 50 still usable in freezing winter conditions.

Affordability. Affordability concerns were identified as one of the main issues in the Greater Paris urban area. While they are partly addressed through solidarity programmes and social protection measures, studies reported that the water bill can amount to up to 6 per cent of the household budget for the poorest workers or unemployed people²⁴. The affordability rate in France is commonly fixed at 3 per cent.

II.B. Self-assessment process

Brief description. The self-assessment was undertaken in France at the initiative of the Ministry for Solidarity and Health and was led by a working group composed of representatives from the City of Paris, Eau de Paris, Syndicat Interdépartemental pour l'Assainissement de l'Agglomération parisienne (SIAAP) and Syndicat des Eaux d'Ile-de-France (SEDIF). It was performed at the local level within the Greater Paris urban area and had a time frame for implementation of six months from December 2012 to May 2013. The main objective of the exercise was to have a comprehensive assessment of the water and sanitation situation and to identify opportunities for improvement. As part of the process, two workshops were organized and a variety of stakeholders participated, including representatives from other ministries, the regional health agency, NGOs and trade unions. The project team also comprised representatives of the major utilities in the City of Paris.

Key lessons learned from the process:

- Self-assessment can be successfully performed at the regional level, but this requires knowledge of the national legal framework, whereas the regional perspective is set against the national one.
- Adequate time and attention must be devoted to carrying out the exercise, putting together a “balanced” self-assessment team, ensuring continuous multi-stakeholder involvement, planning the workshops carefully, using the results of the score-card for strategic evaluation and priority-setting, and presenting the results in attractive formats, e.g. summary sheets, situational analysis.
- The exercise facilitates the production of reliable data and a broad understanding of the components of equitable access to water and sanitation. Ultimately, it helps policymakers focus on the most relevant problems.

Section III: Actions taken to improve equitable access to water and sanitation

The equitable access perspective has informed a range of national policies and measures adopted by France related to water and sanitation. This is widely reflected in the 2015–2019 National Health and Environment Plan (PNSE) jointly implemented by the ministries in charge of health and environment. The plan is articulated around various areas of action and the most significant for equitable access include:

- Promoting the implementation of water safety plans (WSPs), particularly important for the small-scale water supply in rural or mountain areas. The WSPs are applicable regardless of the size of the distribution area; the drinking-water supply is made up of 23,000 distribution areas in France, ranging in size from 50 to 500,000 inhabitants.
- Elaborating a national plan on on-site household sanitation. In this respect, the National Plan on Household Sanitation (2015–2019) was developed in early 2015 and it addresses aspects relevant to equitable access, such as the financial challenges faced by households living in sparsely populated areas.
- Supporting equitable access to water and sanitation (Action 101) by: i) promoting at the regional level the tools produced under the Protocol and raising awareness among decision makers and operators on equity issues related to access to water and sanitation; and ii) defining and implementing specific action plans in the Regional Health and Environment Plan.

Action was also taken on social pricing of water. Owing to the specific organization of public services of water and sanitation in the country, the “Brottes” law was introduced in April 2013 to allow voluntary municipalities to experiment social pricing on water and to assess their impact on users. Such an experiment was proposed to address affordability concerns, with a view to developing a simple and efficient social water pricing system. In April 2015, the Government authorized 50 communities that organize drinking water services (affecting 11 million citizens) to put in place experimental devices provided for by the Brottes law. At least once a year, a report is presented to the National Water Committee (Water Parliament) and the National Advisory

²⁴ Study of the Observatoire des Usagers de l'Assainissement en Ile-de-France (OBUSASS), mentioned in the country report, p13.

Committee on the Price and Quality of Public Services and Sanitation. Local authorities in the experiment come from 11 of the 13 regions, including three French overseas territories (*les Territoires d'Outre-Mer*), and their population ranges from 4,500 to 4.6 million inhabitants. Fifteen per cent of the population of the experimental communities is affected by a system of assistance or social pricing for water. The balance sheet in 2019 after five years shows that concrete situations and solutions were put in place by local authorities, and conclusions were drawn on the project's progress with different types of approaches, beneficiary populations and partnerships, aid modalities and prospects for communities and national coordination.

The experimental measures include for example:

- Tariffs defined to take into account the composition or income of the household. This could result in a first slice of free consumption.
- Financing mechanisms according to which communities could allocate resources from the general budget to finance aid for the payment of water bills and to raise the maximum amount of the grant allocated to the social fund for housing.

Conversely, as part of a national consultation on water, and following the work carried out in 2018, authorities have planned to improve the implementation of measures by local authorities.

Finally, in the overseas territories that face specific challenges in the public provision of water and sanitation services linked with their geographic specificities and a higher poverty rate, which hampers social and economic development, a Plan Eau DOM (PEDOM) for the sustainable management of public services for water and sanitation in Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Martinique, Mayotte, La Reunion and Saint-Martin was adopted in 2016 by the Ministry of Ecological and Inclusive Transition and the Ministry of the Overseas, cooperating with the Ministry for Solidarity and Health, and their main financial operators. One of the principles of the PEDOM is to prioritize improvements in drinking water services and to strengthen sanitation services for better access through "progress contracts" between water and sanitation departments and public funds providers.

Section IV: Financing equitable access to water and sanitation

In France, the financing of water policy at the national level is organized along the following main lines. The Parliament sets out the priority orientation for the multiannual programme and fixes the overall ceiling for expenditures over the period considered. The six water agencies are then principally responsible for implementing water policy. The main contribution to their revenue comes from the water bill, which in 2012 comprised between 80 to 90 per cent of its revenue. In the period between 2013 and 2018, the planned expenditure of the Water Agencies was determined by the Environment and Finance ministries, which expressed the wish to contain the water tax burden on households.

For the overseas territories under the PEDOM, funding of local water and sanitation providers is conditioned by progress contracts since January 2019, which make available a set of technical and financial indicators to improve the management of public services.

At the local level, municipalities have specific budgets for water and sanitation services. With regard to actions relevant to equitable access to water and sanitation, it is interesting to note that French legislation allows municipalities to include access to water in their social protection policies, i.e. preventive aid. Accordingly, the City of Paris assigned part of its preventive housing allocation to help pay water charges. In terms of remedial aid measures, €500,000 was spent in 2017 to pay the water bills of over 5,000 inhabitants.



(Crédit photo: Yannick Pavageau)