

EQUITABLE ACCESS COUNTRY HIGHLIGHTS: SERBIA

Section I: Country setting

Basic information

POPULATION	7.1 million
AREA	88,499 km ²
GDP	US\$ 41.43 billion
GDP PER CAPITA	US\$ 5,900
ACCESS TO DRINKING WATER (2017)	Total: 99% Urban: 100% Rural: 99%
ACCESS TO SANITATION (2017)	Total: 95% Urban: 99% Rural: 95%

Protocol on Water and Health. Serbia acceded the Protocol in April 2013. It has since been active in implementing the provisions of the treaty, including the setting-up of national targets under the Protocol and improving equitable access to water and sanitation. Serbia has chaired the Protocol on Water and Health during the period 2017–2019.

Water sector. Several national ministries are in charge of the water sector: the Ministry of Environmental Protection, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure. Social policy and financial aspects are administered by both the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy and the Ministry of Finances, with the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government also involved. Public policies in Serbia delegate to units of local self-government the maintenance and operation of communal facilities, as well as the regulation of their performance.

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

II.A. Key findings³⁸

Geographical disparities at national level. In rural areas, people rely predominantly on small-scale water supplies and yet there is still a number of challenges. One of them is the lack of a responsible, designated national authority, which consequently leads to the irregular analysis of water quality, which can directly impact on the health of the rural population. Building a centralized water supply system would mobilize high financial costs that are barely justified by the small numbers of users.

Vulnerable and marginalized groups at national level. Serbia's legal framework does not recognize the differentiated needs of vulnerable and marginalized groups. Social categorization is not in line with that of the Equitable Access Score-card, as the definition of social vulnerability only considers financial resources, and social protection is not granted to many categories of users.

Governance framework and geographical disparities at local level. It was found that most municipalities have strategic and operational goals already in place that encompass equitable access to water and sanitation, but only a few have clearly defined targets. Policies to reduce geographical disparities for instance, are addressed through the Sustainable Development Strategy within the priority of rural development, but only a small number of local self-governments have sectoral strategies in place. Moreover, access to sanitation is reportedly low in the local rural areas that carried out the self-assessment, i.e. 0–20 per cent according to the country report³⁹.

Vulnerable and marginalized groups at local level. While the needs of users of health and education facilities and retirement homes are recognized within the legal framework, other groups, such as people with disabilities, do not enjoy any social protection with regards to access to water and sanitation because their categories are not recognized at the local self-government level.

³⁸ 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/2nlxY7p>

³⁹ Self-Assessment Score-card, Equitable Access to Water and Sanitation, Serbia Country Report, p.26.

Affordability at local level. Affordability concerns are mostly dealt with in an ad hoc manner, and no “system solutions” are in place at the municipal level. In most cases, beneficiaries get one-time financial assistance, though not necessarily targeted to cover their water bills. Others who benefit from social protection can sometimes be exempt from payment.

II.B. Self-assessment process

Brief description of the process. In 2016, Serbia decided to apply the tool at both national and district levels. The implementation of the project had a time frame of six months and the leading public authorities involved were the Ministry of Environmental Protection and the Ministry of Health. At the district level, self-assessment was performed in the districts of Sumadija and Pomoravlje, encompassing a total of 13 self-governments⁴⁰. The Regional Economic Development Agency for Sumadija and Pomoravlje (REDASP) was designated as responsible for implementing the project by the Interministerial Joint Body, a national entity established to implement the Protocol and composed of both governmental and non-governmental representatives. As part of the process, Serbia organized two workshops, as well as thematic focus groups in order to ensure effective communications and exchanges with local stakeholders.

Key lessons learned from the process:

- Direct contact with local stakeholders brings about a change of attitude, leading them to appreciate the importance of equitable access to water and sanitation.
- Applying the tool at the local level allowed Serbia to ascertain how the national framework is applied.
- The implementation of thematic focus groups proved useful, as good practices were identified in the self-governments of Sumadija and Pomoravlje, and it was noted that these should be exchanged.

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

III.A. Process of development of the Equitable Access Action Plan

The self-assessment exercise in Serbia was carried out with the aim of developing an action plan on equitable access to water and sanitation based on its results. This Action Plan has been developed from June 2018 to February 2019 through a participative process involving relevant local and national stakeholders, including local self-government representatives, NGOs, service providers, and so on. It was endorsed by the interministerial Joint Body in charge of the implementation of the Protocol on Water and Health in February 2019.

III.B. Main elements of the Equitable Access Action Plan⁴¹

The Equitable Access Action Plan covers a period of three years from June 2019 to June 2022 and includes 53 projects or initiatives targeting the issues prioritized during the assessment and covering both the national and local levels. It includes starting dates and the identification of lead institutions and partners, but it does not yet include funding sources. Formal reporting of the implementation of the Action Plan will take place annually through the meeting of the interministerial Joint Body in charge of implementing the Protocol on Water and Health.

The different projects and initiatives encompass many types of actions:

- Enhancing the knowledge base at national and local level
- Reforms to existing laws
- Improvements in strategic planning at national level
- Improving inter-institutional coordination at local level
- Strengthening the capacity of local self-governments
- Awareness-raising efforts
- Mobilization of financial resources
- Realization of investments

⁴⁰ Of these, 12 participated in the self-assessment.

⁴¹ For more information on the local Equitable Access Action Plans, see <https://bit.ly/2nrWOMi>

Section IV: Financing equitable access to water and sanitation

For the period 2007–2013, Serbia signed a financial agreement with the EU delegation to access the national Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) programme through which it obtained €500 million to improve living conditions in some areas, €76 million of which was approved for the Municipal Infrastructure Support Programme to provide equitable access to water and sanitation.

The majority of municipalities also has mechanisms in place to encourage service providers to implement action to achieve equitable access to water and sanitation, for example network expansion in rural areas. Most local governments have also carried out an assessment of the budgets necessary for achieving equitable access to water and sanitation and consequently they have developed project budgets.

During the process of elaboration of the Action Plan, all participants, i.e. representatives of local municipalities and Public Utility Companies, expressed willingness and interest to consider this document in future budget planning.

