



SDG LENS

Monitoring Sustainable Development
in Eastern Europe & South Caucasus



**SPOTLIGHT REPORT
ON THE IMPLEMENTATION
OF SDG 6: CLEAN WATER
AND SANITATION**

IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

6 CLEAN WATER
AND SANITATION



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INTRODUCTION

In September 2015, the Republic of Moldova undertook the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. Thus, up to 2030, along with the other 192 United Nations member states, Moldova is going to focus its efforts on the elimination of all forms of poverty, combating inequalities and addressing climate change issues, ensuring that **no one is left behind**. Together with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2016, the National Coordinating Council for Sustainable Development was established, which was followed by the complex process of adjusting the objectives, targets, and indicators of the Global 2030 Agenda to the specifics of the country. This process involved all interested parties: the local and national public authorities, the private sector, civil society, academia, and development partners. [The Process of the Nationalization of Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) focused both on their integration into the national strategic framework, and on the creation of a system for reporting and evaluating progress in achieving each relevant target for the Republic of Moldova.¹

The commitment of the Republic of Moldova towards the implementation of the Global 2030 Agenda, also resides in the [National Development Strategy 'Moldova Europeană 2030'](#), approved by the Parliament in November 2022.² This legislative act is a strategic document concerning the whole country, establishing a long-term vision and the developmental direction of the country, setting 2030 as a deadline for the Republic of Moldova to achieve tangible and sustainable improvements in all aspects of the quality of life, in accordance with the 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the European aspirations established in the Moldova-EU Association Agreement. The National Development Strategy 'Moldova Europeană 2030' consists of 10 general objectives, detailed in 33 specific objectives. The connection with the relevant SDG targets is shown for each general objective, also describing the way the authorities intend to achieve it.

In 2020, the Republic of Moldova presented its first [Voluntary National Review regarding the implementation of the 2030 Agenda](#).³ It recognized the common responsibility that all countries share in achieving the SDGs (including the Republic of Moldova), as a way of responding to common challenges in a global reality of perpetual change, emphasizing the firm belief that all actors have significant roles to play in jointly contributing to the achievement of internationally agreed development goals. At the same time, the report presents the specific context of the Republic of Moldova and the progress achieved by the country regarding the implementation of the 17 SDGs, in relation to the [nationalized targets](#).⁴

Resulting from commitments undertaken by our country, this analysis aims to examine the progress made towards achieving [SDG 6 – Access to clean water and sanitation for all](#). SDG 6 and its targets focus on providing safe, affordable water and sanitation services, minimizing water pollution from industrial processes, increasing the efficiency of water use in all economic and social sectors and enhancing the protection of water-related ecosystems. A crucial aspect of SDG 6 is the expanded supply of clean, accessible water and adequate sanitation for all (particularly rural residents, women, and vulnerable people).

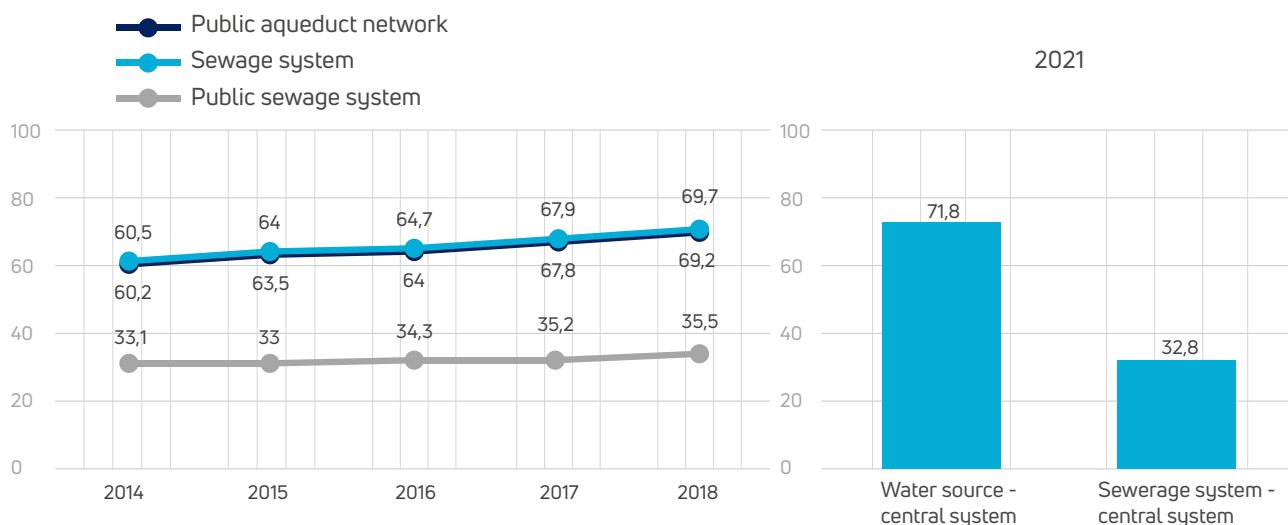
According to the established targets, it is anticipated that 80% of the population will have access to safe water supply systems and services, 65% of the population will be provided with sanitation systems and services by 2023, and 100% by 2030. The desire to increase the equitable access of the population to water and sanitation is also found in The National Development Strategy 'Moldova Europeană 2030', General Objective 2. Improving living conditions (Specific Objective 2.3. Ensuring universal access to aqueducts and safe sanitation systems). The present analysis aims to estimate the progress achieved until this moment in time and intends to produce recommendations that would facilitate increasing the population's access to quality water and adequate sanitation.

EQUITABLE ACCESS TO CLEAN WATER AND ADEQUATE SANITATION

The Republic of Moldova still faces several challenges in terms of ensuring the population's access to water supply systems and services (target 6.1). From the perspective of the development of the service infrastructure, recent years have seen a positive dynamic. Access to public aqueduct networks (central system) has increased, which indicates a relative improvement in living conditions in the Republic of Moldova. According to the data of the National Bureau of Statistics, between 2014 and 2018, the population's access to public aqueduct networks increased by about 9%, reaching 69.2% in 2018. This positive dynamic is still evident today. Thus, in 2021 (two years after the Voluntary National Review), **71.8%** of the country's population was connected to a public network water source. Despite the progress made by the Republic of Moldova in recent years, certain population groups continue to be disadvantaged in terms of access to sustainable and quality water supply systems and services.

While access to water supply systems is steadily increasing, there are significant deficiencies in access to sanitation (target 6.2). Access to public water sources has steadily improved over the past decade. This dynamic is largely due to constant investment in rural communities. Inequalities related to access to central sanitation (sewage) services were more persistent. Although, according to official data, in 2021, about 76% of the population of the Republic of Moldova had access to a sewage system, only **32.8%** of the population was connected to a central sewage system, the rest having their own systems, which most often do not correspond to health regulations. The low rate of access to central sewage services is caused by high costs and less investment in this sphere. Although some investments in sewage systems have been made in recent years, they have proven to be ineffective due to the refusal of the population to connect to public networks. This reluctance is determined by the economic factor (connection costs), by legislative gaps, but also by the population's inadequate understanding of the need for proper wastewater management. The huge gap between the share of the population connected to the central water supply network and the share of the population that has access to public sewage services (39% in 2021) is a determining factor of environmental pollution.

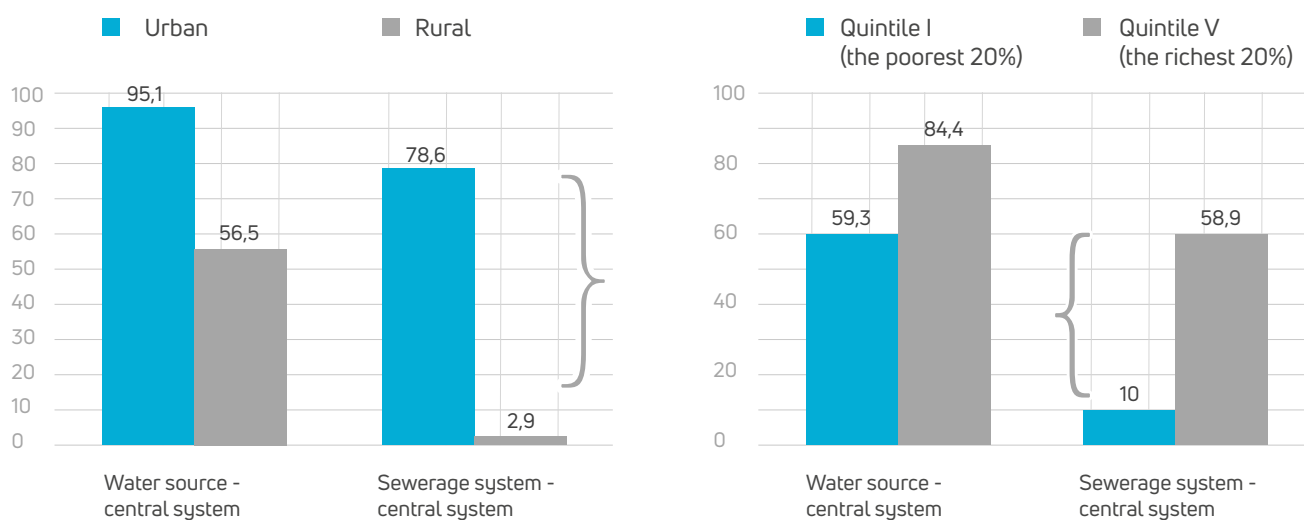
Fig 1. Access to water and sanitation, %



Source: [National Bureau of Statistics](#)⁵

Access to water and sanitation for the rural and low-income population continues to be an important challenge. Households in rural areas, where most of the population lives, usually poor households, have a rate of access to water and sanitation which is at least two times lower than the rate of access in urban areas and those in the richest quintile. The biggest gap is in access to adequate sanitation, as only 2.9% of the rural population and only 10% of the low-income population is connected to the central sewage system.

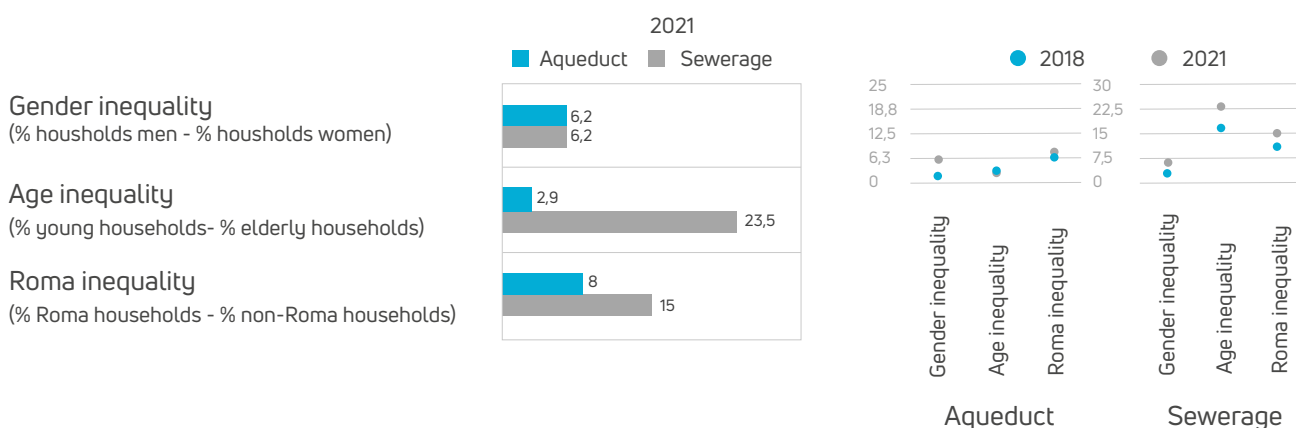
Fig 2. Access to water and sanitation depending on place of residence and income, 2021, %



Source: [National Bureau of Statistics](#)⁶

Although the state has set its target for SDG 6 to ensure equitable access to water and sanitation for all, some population groups continue to be left behind. Age inequality, and Roma inequality are the most underlined, with these groups having limited access to water and sanitation, largely due to the financial factor. These discrepancies are followed by gender inequalities. The country's progress in reducing inequalities remains to be observed. Compared to 2018, gender inequality in accessing water supply services (aqueduct) increased in 2021. For households of elderly people, inequality in terms of access to sanitation (sewerage) has increased significantly. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the volume of housekeeping and house tasks has increased, limited access to water and sanitation is an additional burden for women and vulnerable groups.

Fig 3. Inequalities of access to water and sanitation, percentage



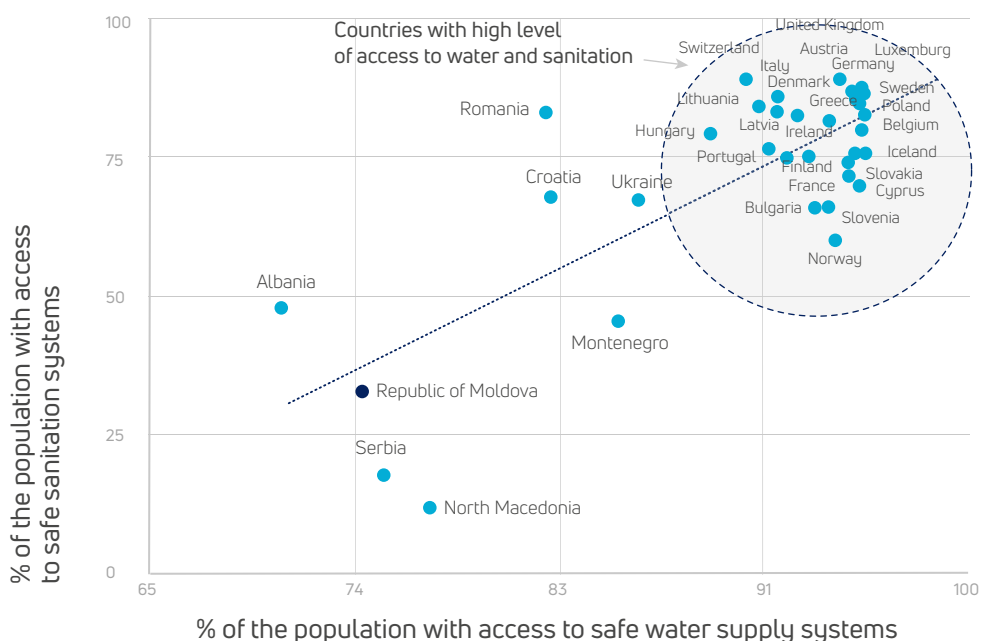
Source: [Report Unequal Moldova 2021](#)⁷, [Report Unequal Moldova 2019](#), Center Partnership for Development (CPD)⁸

At regional level, the Republic of Moldova is an outlier country, standing out from the context of most European countries in terms of the population's access to water and sanitation. In recent years, the population's access to water sources has gradually increased, reaching a coverage of over 70% (from public networks), access to sanitation has a slower increase. This is why the Republic of Moldova is in a weaker position, compared to other European countries, in terms of providing the population with quality and sustainable water and sanitation systems and services (the countries positioned on the left of the quadrant are characterized by a more limited access to such systems and services).

Although the Republic of Moldova has made some progress in reforming its water and environmental institutions and harmonizing its legislation and acts with the European Union's Water Framework Directive, there are still gaps in the management of water resources and water supply to citizens. The Republic of Moldova is the country with the largest water deficit in the region, with approximately 3,000 m³/capita/year of renewable water resources, of which only 400 m³/capita/year comes from the country's territory.

Water resources in the Republic of Moldova depend to a large extent on the volumes of water from the Prut and Dniester rivers, mostly accumulated outside the country. This fact is particularly important, considering that the main source of water supply for the population and for covering the needs of the economy is surface water, which constitutes 85% of the total volume of water consumed. The remaining 15% represents underground water sources (VNR 2020). Given the fact that waste management systems are poorly developed now, measures to prevent pollution and ensure rational consumption and proper management of aquatic resources are imperative. In 2021, [an agreement was signed between the Governments of Romania and the Republic of Moldova](#), which will allow the supply of drinking water from Iasi County (Romania) to Ungheni, Falesti, Glodeni and Nisporeni regions (Republic of Moldova). In this sense, the construction of the necessary infrastructure is underway, including aqueducts passing under the Prut River in four different points. This strategic project will significantly increase the Republic of Moldova's access to drinking water sources.

Fig 4. Positioning of the Republic of Moldova in terms of access to water and sanitation, in a regional context, 2020, %



Sources: [UNECE database](#)⁹, [WHO database](#)¹⁰

CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS

The local authorities have very scarce resources to effectively fulfil their functions, including in the field of water supply and sanitation. In Moldova the provision of water supply and sanitation (WSS) services and ensuring the appropriate infrastructure is formally a competence of the municipalities (authorities of the first level of the local public administration). Although administrative decentralization and subsidiarity is generally a positive development, the challenge is that the local authorities have limited human and financial resources necessary to effectively fulfil their responsibilities, including in the field of water supply and sanitation. This is partly due to excessive territorial and administrative fragmentation – for a population of less than 3 million inhabitants, Moldova has 898 municipalities. Out of that, 811 (90%) municipalities have a population of less than 5000 inhabitants, while 318 (35%) - less than 1500*¹¹. Due to this situation, but also to the financial and fiscal decentralization not keeping pace with the functional decentralization, local budgets can hardly cover the basic administrative and operational costs for the local administration and the provided public services and there are almost no means for capital investments in most of the municipalities. Because of that, local authorities heavily rely on intergovernmental transfers, on national funds (such as the national fund for local and regional development, the “European village” program, etc.) and international development partners’ funds to develop the water supply and sanitation infrastructure.

The situation is impacted by the overall level of economic development/GDP of the country, and by the fact the financial envelope to be shared between the central and local budgets is limited. On the other hand, the affordability levels of the population to pay the tariff for the service is in many cases also a limiting factor for establishing tariff levels that would fully cover operational and capital investments costs for the service delivery, especially when the infrastructure and the services must be developed from the scratch. In rural areas, the high depopulation levels and low density of water and sanitation services’ users raises additional challenges, both in terms of technological process (for instance, not enough used water being discharged for normal functioning of the centralized sewerage systems) and economic aspects (the lower the number of users per km of pipe, or the lower the total volume of water delivered the higher unit cost). The lack of updated construction standards and norms, especially for small-scale networks and systems, often leads to oversized infrastructure and unbearable costs due to lower-than-expected/planned volumes of consumed water or discharged used water.

The capacities of national authorities in the elaboration and implementation of water and sanitation policies are still low. Although the local authorities are fully responsible for the organization and delivery of water supply and sanitation services, the national authorities have their share of the responsibility, especially when it comes to the elaboration, adoption and implementation of public policies, regulation, and control. One specific challenge related to the national institutional framework is linked with the reform of the central specialized public administration, conducted in 2021, when the Ministry of Agriculture, Regional Development and Environment was split into the Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Infrastructure and Regional Development (MIRD).

After the split, the WSS policies were to be transferred to MIRD. The transition however was very slow, and to date, although a special department for water supply and sanitation was finally formed in MIRD, the capacities of the staff and of the ministry overall to lead the elaboration and implementation of policies in the field are still low (the experienced staff from the Ministry of Environment dealing previously with the WSS remained there, as the ministry is still dealing with aspects relating to water protection and management of water basins). Moldova Water Security and Sanitation Project, a World Bank financed Project, signed in 2022 and to be implemented by MIRD in the next 4 years, is expected to increase access to improved water supply and sanitation services in selected rural areas and towns, and to strengthen institutional capacities for water supply and sanitation service delivery at national and local levels.

There are still some gaps in the way WSS operators are controlled by the national regulatory body. In 2013, with the adoption of the Law no. 303/2013, on water supply and sanitation, the National Agency for Energy Regulation (NAER) was assigned powers to license WSS operators, to endorse tariff calculation and other regulatory functions. However, NAER is only working closely with operators from urban areas. In contrast, the smaller operators from rural areas, although should comply to the very same rules and regulations, they are not being licensed and are not directly controlled by the national regulatory body. This makes the users of the smaller operators that are not checked by NAER more vulnerable to inefficient management, arbitrarily set tariffs, and similar drawbacks. One of the approaches and objectives from Moldova's recently revised National WSS Strategy 2014–2030 is the regionalization of the WSS operators (thus aiming to combine/reduce the number of smaller operators), with the preferred use of surface waters as a source whenever possible. However, the pace of regionalization is slow, one reason being the underdeveloped culture and practice of inter-municipal cooperation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE GOVERNMENT

- **Clarify functions and strengthen the institutional framework at the national level.** The competencies relevant to the efficient coordination of the water supply and sanitation policies and efforts to achieve SDG 6 and its targets are not fully clarified, scattered across various institutions, or not covered at all. A comprehensive functional analysis of the sector is necessary. Also, the consolidation of the capacities of the relevant institutions, including the newly created WSS department from MIRD is also crucial.
- **Extend the regulatory powers of the National Agency for Energy Regulation to operators from rural areas.** The creation of a separate agency to be fully focused on communal services (public utilities) could be also considered, given the NAER reluctance to also cover operators from rural areas.

* [Draft national strategy for public administration reform](#)

* Adopted by Government Decision 440 of July 1, 2020

In parallel, legislative amendments to push LPAs and operators from rural areas to get licensed or to delegate the management of the WSS services to bigger licensed regional operators should be pursued.

- **Increase the effort and pace of construction standards and norms for WSS systems elaboration and adoption, especially for small-scale ones and for individual appropriate systems for wastewater treatment.** Given the demographic, geographic, economic, and other tendencies, proper standards, and norms to govern the process of elaboration of the technical designs of the future WSS systems should be conducive to resilient and cost-efficient infrastructure.
- **Speed up the elaboration of the national program for water supply and sanitation development.** Having in mind the vision to regionalize the WSS services and related infrastructure and to preferably use surface water sources, when possible, a national plan is necessary to guide the planning of major investment infrastructure projects, including intake, water treatment, and magistral, in order to avoid situations when further extensions and regionalization are not possible due to bad planning.
- **Encourage full cost recovery tariffs, but protect the vulnerable.** Both in urban municipalities that are under NAER control, but especially in rural municipalities that are not so closely supervised, the tariffs are approved by municipal councils having in mind the political stake of the action, the tendency being to approve lower tariffs that lead to further infrastructure degradation and lack of any development. Appropriate legislative measures (along with extending the national regulator's supervision to operators from rural areas) should be put in place to avoid this. On the other side, a system of tariff compensations and other social protection measures should be put in place to protect vulnerable groups. This should also include measures to help cover the connection costs that sometimes are to be supported by the households as a contribution.
- **Integrate the inclusiveness perspective in all national water and sanitation programmes, interventions, and plans.** The existing legislative and policy framework provides generic measures to avoid discrimination when authorities develop water and sanitation services. The data presented above shows that access inequalities persist because the responsible authorities do not recognize them as a priority and do not deal with them in a more consistent and programmatic way. Therefore, the first principle in improving the existing legal and policy framework is to shift the focus from avoiding discrimination to reducing inequalities of access. This principle will require the existing legal framework to define what unequal access means. At the same time, it is imperative to integrate social inclusion into investment programs. The legal framework should provide for the obligation of all investment programs to identify, analyse, and provide measures to reduce inequalities regarding access to water and sanitation during their development.
- **Collect disaggregated data on access to water and sanitation.** The Moldavian authorities do not have sufficient data and analysis regarding the most significant access inequalities (by different population groups). In the absence of adequate analysis and understanding, we arrive at interventions and investments that do not take these inequalities into account. All those responsible for water and sanitation from the central to the local level must be mandated to collect such data in a more programmatic and coherent way.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

- **Empower civil society, especially vulnerable and marginalized groups, to participate in decision-making.** Access to water and sanitation in the Republic of Moldova has proven to be inequitable, with certain groups being left behind. The effort to reduce inequities must be a constant one, based on the systematic collection of disaggregated data. Any sustainable approach to reducing inequalities in access to water and sanitation will entail empowering vulnerable and marginalized groups to participate and change local or regional water and sanitation priorities. This will help strengthen inclusive and equitable water and sanitation policies.
- **Monitor the progress of public authorities regarding the implementation of SDG 6.** Civil society plays an essential role in the process of monitoring the implementation of public policies. Its involvement in encouraging the implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and review of the SDGs is essential to ensure that they are inclusive and people-centred and that the Government recognizes and responds to the different needs of different population groups. Although the Government periodically presents reports on the implementation of the SDGs, civil society can develop independent reports that present an alternative perspective to the country's progress. Civil society monitoring reports can serve as a tool to increase government accountability to citizens, but also as an important mechanism for influencing the Government to achieve progress in terms of commitments to the 2030 Agenda. Civil society is an indispensable element of the framework for measuring and monitoring the implementation of the SDGs, as it often provides a critical link between Government and stakeholders. Civil society can complement or objectively address official reports, intervene with recommendations for national policies and implementation plans.
- **Raise awareness on the reasonable use of resources and environmental protection** through the development of training programs, educational materials and courses, community activities and initiatives, etc. Taking into consideration the limited water resources and the challenges related to their effective management, the general rhetoric regarding the inexhaustible water resource must be changed towards the awareness, proper understanding, and treatment of it as a finite resource. At the same time, although public waste disposal systems currently have a small national coverage, it is imperative to increase awareness among the population of the need to protect the environment, by avoiding the pollution of waters and adjacent surfaces.
- **Build partnerships with local authorities in developing and applying for projects and grants to develop WSS infrastructure in local communities.** As mentioned above, local authorities have very limited staffing, know-how and capacities, including when it comes to project application writing and implementation. These types of partnerships of the civil society organizations with local authorities could offer an immediate solution to this problem before a territorial reform or a more efficient intermunicipal cooperation practice is implemented.
- **Keep local authorities and WSS operators accountable.** Civil society organizations, directly or through information and education campaigns for the WSS service users, could inform people of their rights, could contribute to an increased transparency and more motivated authorities and service providers, for a continuous improvement of the service quality and access.

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