

Science for Environment Policy

Implementing the EU Water Framework Directive – lack of evidence for Eastern European countries

A recent study has analysed research on implementing the [Water Framework Directive](#)¹ (WFD) in Europe and identified a number of research gaps that could be filled. For example, some countries, such as Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, have not been well studied and more research on the experiences of such countries would build up knowledge on the implementation of the WFD across Europe.

Adopted in 2000, the WFD requires all Member States to protect and improve the water quality in rivers, lakes, groundwater, transitional and coastal waters by 2015, or, in certain well-defined conditions, 2027 at the latest. The Directive established a framework for action and a timetable for Member States to achieve objectives in the legislation.

Under the Directive, Member States must manage water bodies at the natural, river-basin scale. Member States have been required to implement the WFD in different steps. From 2003–2009, they were obliged to identify River Basin Districts (RBDs) and prepare river-basin management plans. These plans include a programme of measures to achieve, in a cost-effective manner, the environmental objectives of the WFD, with the emphasis on good ecological quality. The Directive also encourages public participation in implementing the WFD, especially in developing the integrated river-basin management plans.

The first management cycle of the RBD management plans ran from 2009–2015. Having reached this important milestone, this study is the first to assess research on the implementation of the WFD in the EU.

The researchers used meta-analysis — combining the information from many studies, to comprehensively review academic studies on the implementation of the WFD in Europe. They conducted an Internet search of research databases to identify 89 relevant studies published in English-language, peer-reviewed journals.

They then analysed the content of the studies according to 35 dimensions, or items, to explore, among other things: the focus of the research questions — which covered the EU countries that were studied; the policy level studied (national, river basin district or catchment); the transboundary aspects of river-basin management; what stages of the implementation process were studied; as well as some of the requirements Member States must meet in implementing the WFD, including environmental objectives, economic analysis, planning processes, policy integration, public participation and river-basin management.

The analysis revealed that the most studied EU countries were the United Kingdom (24 studies), Germany (19) and the Netherlands (16), then Spain (11) and Sweden (11). In contrast, the researchers did not find any studies on some countries, for example, countries that joined the EU in or after 2004, such as Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. They also found no or comparatively few studies on the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and relatively few studies on one of the founder states, Italy.²

More research is needed on these understudied countries, say the researchers. Moreover, they highlight the need for studies to compare the WFD implementation in different EU countries. For example, comparisons between northern and southern countries would be useful in understanding different problems related to water quality and water quantity and how these affect implementing environmental legislation. They also suggest more attention be given to countries applying to join the EU as well as countries that are associated with the EU, such as Switzerland and Norway.

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1. Directive 2000/60/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2000 establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water policy <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32000L0060>

2. It should be noted that — as the authors limited themselves to studies in English only — publications in the languages of those underrepresented Member States are not considered here.

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Although 33 studies were conducted at the level of river-basin districts, only one of these covered mechanisms to manage shared water resources. The researchers suggest studies on the management of transboundary river basins are needed to fill this gap.

Most of the studies (86 out of 89) covered the 2003–2009 preparation stages of implementing the WFD, especially drafting the river-basin management plans. Most of these studies focused on a particular time or stage of implementation. What is now needed, say the researchers, is more research to compare the implementation process over time, as well as to gain an in-depth understanding of the process, particularly in different countries and different sectors.

Some of the requirements Member States have had to meet in implementing the WFD were more studied than others. Public participation in the consultation and decision-making processes has been well researched. However, studies on river-basin planning, management at ecological scales and economic analysis, for example, relating to exemptions from certain requirements of the WFD or different management options, were less well covered.

For future research, the study's authors suggest exploring how water-management activities can support climate change adaptation. Other avenues for research include how the concept of ecosystem services has been used to support implementation of the WFD, as well as how the WFD interacts with other legislation, such as the [Floods Directive](#) and [Marine Strategy Framework Directive](#) and the [Birds and Habitats Directives](#).

The study also highlights the lack of studies using theory, for example, to explain implementation patterns of the WFD, as well as the predominance of descriptive studies, which give no information on their data and methods.

