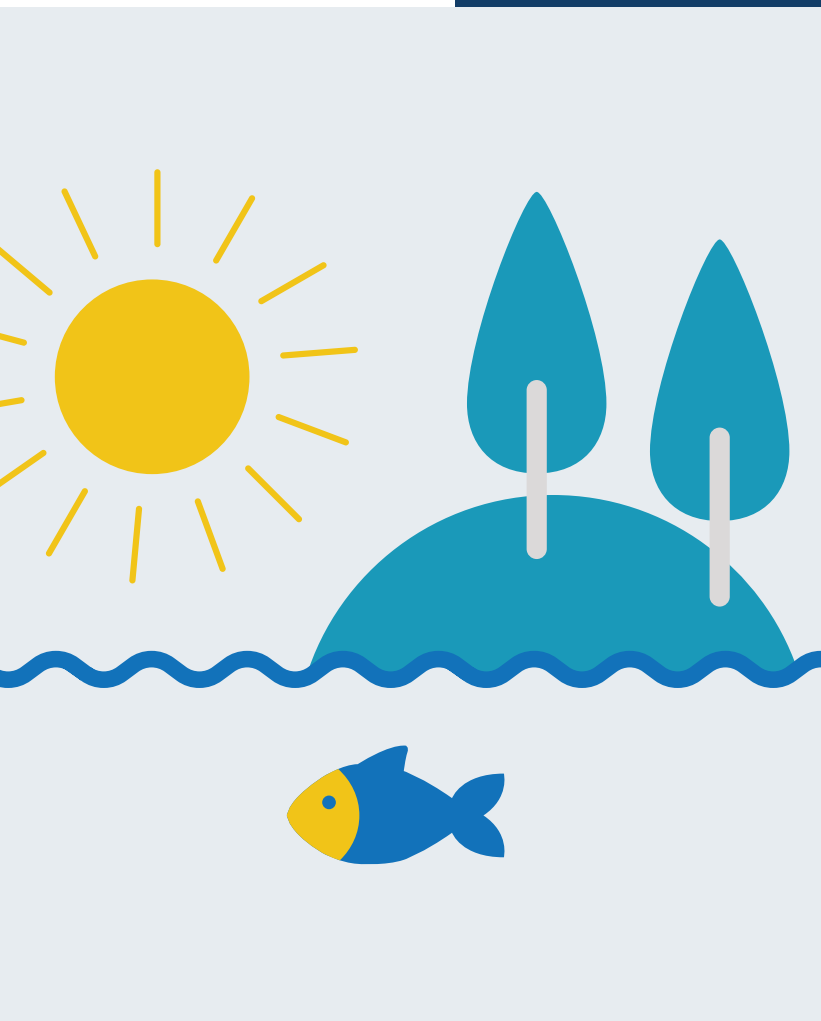


MEDLAB THEMATIC TALKS

Water Resilience in the Mediterranean

The Mediterranean is already experiencing many of the water pressures that Europe will face more widely in the years ahead. Droughts are lasting longer, floods are becoming more intense, and competition for water is increasing between agriculture, households and tourism. Across seventeen Interreg programmes, cooperation on water has been building practical responses for years. This edition looks at what €326.6 M of water cooperation across two programming periods has delivered, and how that experience can contribute to the European Water Resilience Strategy.



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ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

Water is one of the Mediterranean's defining constraints. The region is warming faster than the global average; agriculture accounts for the largest share of consumption, while tourism increases demand precisely where and when supply is tightest. Water losses in European supply networks range from 8% to 57% nationally, with several Mediterranean systems at the upper end. In June 2025, the European Commission adopted the European Water Resilience Strategy, structured around three objectives: restoring the water cycle, building a water-smart economy, and securing clean and affordable water for all. It also set an EU-wide ambition to improve water efficiency by at least 10% by 2030.

This edition places that policy shift alongside what Mediterranean cooperation has already delivered. Drawing on keep.eu, it identifies a screened portfolio of 173 water-relevant Interreg projects across the seventeen Mediterranean programmes — 97 in 2014–2020 and 76 so far in 2021–2027* — with total budgets of €326.6 M. It also draws on the experience of practitioners who took part in the MedLab Thematic Week in January 2026.

Can territorial cooperation help deliver the Strategy in the Mediterranean? The Strategy itself recognises Interreg as a source of practice for two of its flagship actions. Practitioners, however, highlighted a more difficult challenge: many solutions already exist, but project results do not always make the final step into the policies, budgets and operational routines needed for wider uptake.

* COOPERATION ON WATER ACROSS THE MEDITERRANEAN

Water is never abstract — it is always local

Barbara Sarnari, project partner and Vice-President of SVI.MED (Euro-Mediterranean Centre for Sustainable Development), reframed the whole discussion with a single observation. “Water” is not one thing: drinking water, freshwater, groundwater, wastewater, green water and reclaimed water each carry different infrastructures, rules and cultural meanings — and water can be a resource, a service, a risk, even a weapon. Its quality, availability and use depend on geography, climate, governance and culture, which is exactly why cooperation on water is both complex and necessary.

Her strongest point concerned what has become normalised. Europe still uses drinking-quality water for purposes that do not require it, while the infrastructure that makes this possible remains largely invisible. That invisibility can make waste easier to overlook. Cooperation on water, she argued, therefore begins not with ready-made solutions but with asking better questions together and adapting the answers to local realities.

Salinity is reducing agricultural production

Veljko Srzić, PhD, of the Faculty of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Geodesy at the University of Split, illustrated the problem through the Neretva delta. The area has been drained and cultivated since the 1880s, but seawater intrusion now leaves soils salt-crusting for six to eight months a year and is reducing production across thousands of once-fertile hectares. Half of Croatia's territory is coastal and structurally short of freshwater, despite water-rich mountains inland.

Four linked Interreg projects — MoST, SeCure, SWAMrisk and MoWaCLIM — built the monitoring and modelling to prove that targeted measures, a seafront barrier and managed irrigation channels, can shrink the salt-intrusion zone dramatically. The problem, he noted, is regional in nature but local in character; and the harder intrusion to reverse is institutional — the studies, strategies and action plans exist, but political uptake lags behind the science.



From pilot to system: closing the uptake gap

Roula Khadra, researcher and project coordinator at CIHEAM Bari (International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies), named the condition many practitioners recognised: capitalisation fatigue. Her project sequence — MENAWARA generating field evidence on reclaimed water in agriculture, MEDWAYCAP building a Mediterranean capitalisation pathway and a Memorandum of Understanding signed up to Union for the Mediterranean level — shows how far cooperation can carry results. But an MoU still needs institutional focal points, national planning cycles and budget lines to bite, and those cannot be solved within a single project.

The answers on display were institutional, not technical: the River Contracts of WABIN, a voluntary participatory planning tool described by Diego Santalana of the Upper Adriatic Technology Park as a form of direct democracy, transferred across the Isonzo/Soča basin from Italy to Slovenia; a 200-member multi-level governance platform in the Balkans and Türkiye, with its blunt design rule — do not invent a new bicycle if the bicycle exists; and Lebanon's new national committee on irrigation water, seeded by farmer-level work under WISEMED. Durability, in every case, came from plugging results into structures that outlive the project.



IN FOCUS — WATER CHALLENGES AND INTERREG SOLUTIONS

Six major challenges shape water management in the Mediterranean. Each has a regional dimension but is experienced locally, and Interreg projects are already testing responses across the basin. The following section starts with the challenge and then shows what cooperation is doing in practice.

1. Water is scarce — and demand peaks when supply is lowest

The challenge. A third of EU territory is under water stress, with much of the pressure concentrated in the Mediterranean. Rainfall is often concentrated in periods when demand is lower, while tourism increases consumption precisely when reserves are under greatest pressure. Islands and dry coastal areas have few alternative sources to draw on. The Water Resilience Strategy responds with the ‘water efficiency first’ principle: reduce demand, reuse water and only then expand supply. Yet only 2.4% of the EU’s wastewater is currently reused.

What cooperation does about it. Territorial cooperation has been working on non-conventional water sources and reuse for more than a decade. MENAWARA generated field evidence on reclaimed water in agriculture through living labs in Italy, Spain, Palestine and Jordan, tracking soil health over several years rather than a single season. MEDWAYCAP developed this into a Mediterranean transfer pathway, a public best-practice inventory and a Memorandum of Understanding taken to Union for the Mediterranean level. ECO FLOW replicates a patented reuse pilot in additional treatment plants under the Water Reuse Regulation 2020/741, while AQUAMAN develops reuse, harvesting and desalination solutions for islands and tourist coasts where seasonal demand and limited freshwater leave few alternatives.

MENAWARA → MEDWAYCAP

Lead partner: CIHEAM Bari and partners across both shores.
ENI CBC Med · €2.9 M and €1.1 M · closed

ECO FLOW

Lead partner: Acquedotto Pugliese.
Interreg Greece–Italy · €1.6 M (EU €1.2 M) · 2025–2027

AQUAMAN

Lead partner: El Legado Andalusi Andalusian Public Foundation.
Interreg Euro-MED · €1.5 M (EU €1.2 M) · 2025–2027

2. Water quality is deteriorating

The challenge. Only 39.5% of EU surface waters are in good ecological status and 26.8% in good chemical status. In the Mediterranean, two pressures are particularly important: seawater intrusion into coastal aquifers, which salinates groundwater used for irrigation and supply; and persistent pollutants — including PFAS, pharmaceuticals and nutrients — that accumulate faster than they can be removed. Quantity and quality are closely linked: water that is too degraded to use effectively reduces the available resource.

What cooperation does about it. SWAMrisk maps where salt is entering the aquifer, combining multi-depth probes, electromagnetic surveys and calibrated models to identify where barriers or managed channels could reduce the intrusion zone. It builds on work developed since 2019 through MoST, SeCure and MoWaCLIM. ALERT-PFAS addresses persistent chemicals highlighted by the Strategy, including those associated with firefighting foams, while EMERGENTcy focuses on emerging contaminants and pharmaceutical residues in the water cycle.

SWAMrisk

Lead partner: University of Split, Faculty of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Geodesy.
Interreg Italy–Croatia · €2.2 M (EU €1.8 M) · 2024–2026

ALERT-PFAS

Lead partner: Universidade NOVA de Lisboa.
Interreg SUDOE · €1.9 M (EU €1.4 M) · 2024–2026

EMERGENTcy

Lead partner: Navarra de Infraestructuras Locales (NILSA).
Interreg POCTEFA · €2.0 M (EU €1.3 M) · 2024–2026

3. Floods and droughts are intensifying — and increasingly interconnected

The challenge. Floods cost Europe €325 billion between 1980 and 2023, while the 2022 drought alone cost around €40 billion. In the Mediterranean, both can affect the same catchment within a short period. Hardened and drained landscapes shed intense rainfall quickly, increasing flash-flood risk, but retain less water for dry months. Wetlands can help regulate both extremes, yet they are disappearing three times faster than forests and were not discussed at the EU Water Resilience Forum in December 2025.

What cooperation does about it. Wetland4Change assesses the contribution of restored wetlands to both climate mitigation and flood regulation across five pilot sites in five countries. It converts the results into ecosystem-service maps and decision-support tools that help planners compare restoration with alternative land uses. LocAll4Flood focuses on preparedness, deploying an early-warning system in nine pilot catchments from Thessaloniki to Mallorca, together with a multi-stakeholder governance model and a catalogue of nature-based solutions.

Wetland4Change

Lead partner: University of Forestry, Sofia.
Interreg Euro-MED · €1.8 M (EU €1.4 M) · 2024–2026

LocAll4Flood

Lead partner: BETA Technological Centre, Balmes University Foundation.
Interreg Euro-MED · €2.3 M (EU €1.9 M) · 2024–2026

4. Too much treated water is lost before it reaches users

The challenge. National leakage levels across the EU range from 8% to 57%, with several Mediterranean networks at the upper end. High leakage means paying for abstraction, treatment and energy without delivering the full volume to users, while placing additional pressure on already stressed sources. Rural, mountain and island systems can be especially vulnerable because networks are often small, fragmented and supported by limited technical capacity. The Drinking Water Directive will require national leakage action plans by 2030.

What cooperation does about it. WATERLINK addresses losses in the Trebišnjica supply system, which is shared by three utilities in three countries, using GIS mapping, district metering, remote-read meters and a joint monitoring centre. WATERVILL modernises small independent village systems through smart metering, leak detection, nature-based solutions and community-led governance in four Balkan pilot municipalities. AQUA supports utilities across six countries in developing phased digital twins, with each partner building the monitoring or decision-support components required in its own context.

WATERLINK

Lead partner: City of Trebinje.

Interreg IPA Croatia–Bosnia and Herzegovina–Montenegro · €1.6 M (EU €1.4 M) · 2024–2026

WATERVILL

Lead partner: Municipality of Žabljak, Montenegro.

Interreg Euro-MED · €3.7 M (EU €3.0 M) · 2025–2029

AQUA

Lead partner: Acquedotto Pugliese, with utilities from Ljubljana, Arta, Tirana, the Montenegrin coast and Grocka.

Interreg IPA Adriatic–Ionian · €1.7 M (EU €1.4 M) · 2024–2027

5. Agriculture uses the most water — and efficiency gains are hard won

The challenge. Agriculture accounts for 51% of EU water consumption and considerably more on the southern shore, with marked north–south differences. Improving efficiency is challenging: research and technical solutions exist, but many farms operate on margins that make costly or experimental measures difficult to adopt. Reclaimed water can also face resistance from both growers and regulators.

What cooperation does about it. MAENA transfers research-tested water-efficiency and solar-integration solutions to more than twenty demonstration farms across six countries, prioritising low-cost, no-regret actions that can be adopted quickly. SWAMED aims to reduce irrigation demand by 30% at pilot sites through sensors, satellite and drone monitoring, and a decision-support system co-designed with farmers and operators. IRRIGAVIT applies a similar approach to viticulture, refining irrigation and soil-management protocols to help vineyards cope with water stress.

MAENA

Lead partner: Mediterranean Renewable Energy Centre, Tunisia.

Interreg NEXT MED · €2.8 M (EU €2.5 M) · 2025–2028

SWAMED

Lead partner: Università degli Studi della Campania Luigi Vanvitelli.

Interreg NEXT MED · €2.7 M (EU €2.4 M) · 2025–2028

IRRIGAVIT

Lead partner: University of Udine.

Interreg Italy–Slovenia · €0.6 M (EU €0.5 M) · 2023–2025

6. Water crosses borders; governance often does not

The challenge. Europe has 75 cross-border river basins, while some of the Mediterranean's most stressed aquifers extend across national borders. The Water Framework Directive requires coordinated management of international basins, yet the Commission's own assessment points to inconsistencies between upstream and downstream measures and insufficient attention to water quantity. In practice, sewage collected on one side of a border may be treated on the other, while an aquifer recharged in one country may be abstracted in another.

What cooperation does about it. URAMUGA upgrades shared sanitation and supply infrastructure in the Bidasoa and Nivelle catchments and establishes a standing cross-border governance framework for the integrated water cycle, designed to continue beyond the project itself. WABIN transfers River Contracts — a voluntary participatory planning instrument described by practitioners as a form of direct democracy — across the Isonzo/Soča basin from Italy to Slovenia, showing how shared governance can be strengthened without creating new legal structures.

URAMUGA

Lead partner: Navarra de Infraestructuras Locales (NILSA).
Interreg POCTEFA · €3.6 M (EU €2.4 M) · 2024–2026

WABIN

Lead partner: Upper Adriatic Technology Park.
Interreg Italy–Slovenia · €0.9 M (EU €0.7 M) · 2024–2026



2021–2027 — CONTINUITY AND A CHANGE OF SCALE

Mediterranean water cooperation has changed between 2014–2020 and 2021–2027, but the current figures should not be read as evidence of decline. The closed 2014–2020 period delivered 97 water-relevant projects worth €180.5 M. The current period already includes 76 projects worth €146.1 M*, with 69 still running and further calls still being contracted. The lower total therefore reflects a mid-period snapshot rather than a completed cycle.

The more significant change is in where funding is concentrated. In 2014–2020, cross-border programmes accounted for 63% of the water budget; in the current period, 70% sits in the four transnational and sea-basin programmes. Interreg Euro-MED alone increased its screened water budget from €11.7 M to €46.3 M, concentrated in fewer, larger projects. This suggests a stronger recognition of water as a basin-scale challenge, while cross-border programmes continue to address highly local shared assets such as networks, treatment plants and aquifers.

	2021–2027*	2014–2020
Water-relevant projects (screened)	76 of 238 returned	97 of 240 returned
— core water projects	54	63
— projects with a substantial water work package	22	34
Total budgets	€146.1 M	€180.5 M
EU funding	€117.5 M	€150.7 M
Projects still ongoing at cut-off	69 of 76	—

A mid-period snapshot compared with a closed period: fewer projects so far, but larger average project budgets.

* 2021–2027 figures: mid-period snapshot, cut-off 19 August 2026. See the methodology and data note at the end of this publication.

Programme (2021–2027 name)	Projects 21–27*	€M 21–27*	Projects 14–20	€M 14–20
Interreg VI-B Euro-MED	16	46.3	6	11.7
Interreg VI-B SUDOE	14	25.9	13	20.6
Interreg VI-B NEXT MED	8	21.6	10	25.2
Interreg VI-A Italy–Croatia	6	11.5	7	12.7
Interreg VI-B IPA Adriatic–Ionian	5	7.8	3	4.8
Interreg VI-A POCTEFA	3	6.5	4	8.4
Interreg VI-A IPA Croatia–Bosnia and Herzegovina–Montenegro	4	5.9	0	0.0
Interreg VI-A Italy–Slovenia	5	4.4	3	5.3
Interreg VI-A NEXT Italy–Tunisia	4	3.5	3	3.7
Interreg VI-A Italy–France (Maritime)	2	3.3	10	22.6
Interreg VI-A IPA Greece–Albania	3	2.9	6	7.8
Interreg VI-A Greece–Cyprus	2	2.2	5	4.5
Interreg VI-A Greece–Italy	1	1.6	4	3.5
Interreg VI-A IPA Greece–North Macedonia	1	1.4	6	6.0
Interreg VI-A IPA Italy–Albania–Montenegro	2	1.2	3	12.3
Interreg VI-A Greece–Bulgaria	0	0.0	8	22.3
Interreg VI-A Italy–Malta	0	0.0	2	4.5
Balkan–Mediterranean (discontinued after 2014–2020)	—	—	4	4.6
TOTAL	76	146.1	97	180.5

The table lists all seventeen current Mediterranean programmes, including the two with no retained water project at the cut-off date, as well as the discontinued Balkan–Mediterranean programme from the previous period.

What the comparison shows

- **Interreg Euro-MED** shows the largest increase, from €11.7 M to €46.3 M, with water now appearing across several thematic missions, from Natural Heritage (floods and wetlands) to Innovative Sustainable Economy (rural water and reuse).
- **IPA Adriatic-Ionian** increased from €4.8 M to €7.8 M, adding work on drought preparedness and urban flood decision-support to a portfolio in which these themes had previously been limited.
- **Interreg IPA Croatia-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Montenegro** is a new contributor in the screened portfolio: no water projects were retained for 2014–2020, compared with four projects (€5.9 M) in the current period. This is particularly relevant in a territory where water systems are physically shared across borders.
- **Greece-Bulgaria** had the largest 2014–2020 water portfolio of any cross-border programme (€22.3 M), yet no current-period projects were returned in the extract. This appears to reflect data coverage and contracting pace rather than a withdrawal from the theme, so current-period totals should be treated as a minimum rather than a final figure.

A thematic shift — water is increasingly framed as climate policy

The clearest change between periods is not necessarily what projects do, but how they are framed. In 2014–2020, five of the 97 retained projects were classified under climate change and biodiversity; in 2021–2027, 30 of 76 carry that classification, making it the second most frequent after water management. Knowledge transfer and governance also appear more often, while traditional infrastructure classifications are less prominent. The data therefore point to a shift in framing: water is increasingly treated as part of climate adaptation rather than only as an environmental-management issue.

Most frequent themes 2014–2020	Projects	Most frequent themes 2021–2027*	Projects
Water management	53	Water management	44
Managing natural & man-made threats	19	Climate change & biodiversity	30
Waste & pollution	16	Waste & pollution	19
Sustainable management of resources	12	Agriculture, fisheries & forestry	13
Agriculture, fisheries & forestry	8	Knowledge & technology transfer	12
Tourism	7	Innovation capacity / Managing threats	9
Waterways, lakes & rivers	6	Governance & partnership	8

A project may appear under more than one theme; see the methodology note for how themes are recorded.



Interreg's contribution to the Water Resilience Strategy in the Mediterranean

Mapped onto the three objectives of the European Water Resilience Strategy, the current Mediterranean portfolio covers the ground unevenly but tellingly.

Restoring and protecting the water cycle is well served. Aquifer recharge and monitoring run from Istrian karst to Adriatic deltas (BLUE RECHARGE, Clepsydra, MoWaCLIM, SWAMrisk); wetlands are treated as water infrastructure (Wetland4Change, GREW); and pollution is tackled at source, from pharmaceuticals and emerging contaminants (EMERGENTcy) to nutrients (Phos4Cycle) and PFAS from firefighting foams (ALERT-PFAS). MAENA works explicitly on replenishing the small water cycle — sponge logic, two years before the Strategy proposed a Sponge Facility.

Building a water-smart economy is the portfolio's centre of gravity: efficiency and reuse in agriculture (SWAMED, IDRON, IRRIGAVIT, SMART GREEN WATER), in tourism (AQUAMAN) and in rural systems (GestEAUr, SOLLAGUA, WATERVILL), together with leakage reduction from the Adriatic (WATERLINK) to the Atlantic border (URAMUGA).

Securing clean and affordable water for all is represented mainly through networks, quality monitoring and cross-border supply security. By contrast, affordability, pricing and social access receive very limited attention in the screened portfolio.

Across the two periods, reuse, efficiency-first approaches, nature-based flood management and drought preparedness were established elements of the Mediterranean portfolio before the adoption of COM(2025) 280. The Strategy itself cites practices identified through Interreg as inputs to flagship actions on sponge landscapes and transboundary cooperation. This suggests that territorial cooperation can provide useful evidence for emerging EU policy, particularly where approaches have already been tested in practice.

The mapping also highlights gaps. Industrial water efficiency — now a competitiveness priority, with pilots planned in industrial clusters — is barely represented in the Mediterranean Interreg portfolio. Desalination innovation also features only marginally despite the region's exposure, while water pricing and affordability are largely absent. Practitioners identified wetlands as an additional gap in the wider policy debate, noting their absence from the EU Water Resilience Forum in December 2025. These areas are revisited in the recommendations at the end of the publication.

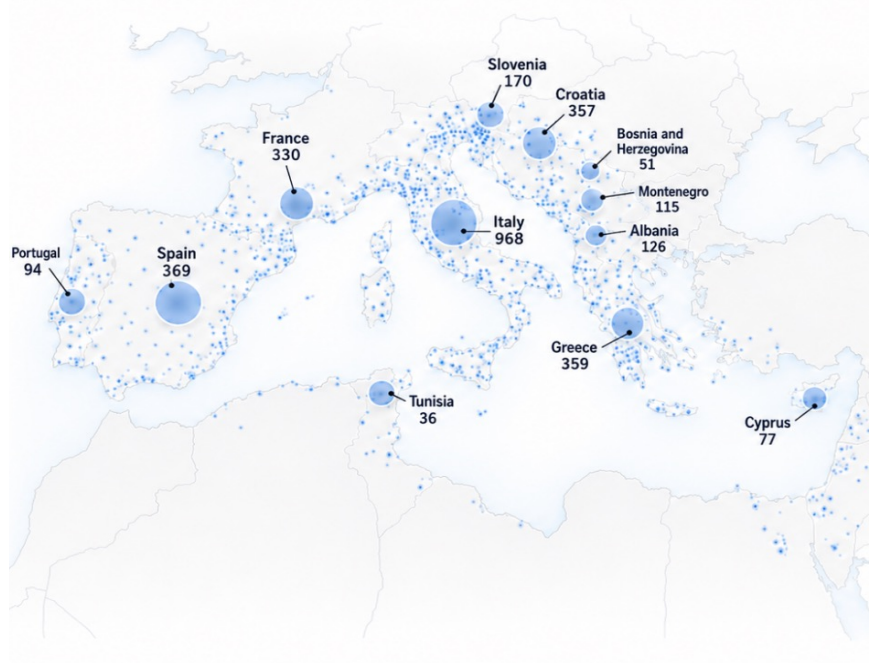
Where the partners are — research leads, operators remain under-represented

The 76 current projects account for 573 partner participations from 25 countries. Ten regions show the highest concentrations of participation in Mediterranean water cooperation.

The Geography of Water Cooperation in the Mediterranean

Partner location in water-related projects reported to KEEP.eu to date (2021-2027).

Main map: 1,759 partner participations plotted at organisation coordinates across 24 countries



Where are the highest numbers of partner participations?

Combined total across 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 KEEP.eu partner sheets

1. Italy	968
2. Spain	369
3. Greece	359
4. Croatia	357
5. France	330
6. Slovenia	170
7. Albania	126
8. Montenegro	115
9. Portugal	94
10. Cyprus	77

Combined total: 3,405 partner participations

How is the geography of water cooperation evolving so far?

- The Mediterranean core remains stable across both periods.
- The current 2021-2027 snapshot suggest relatively stronger weight for Spain, France, Portugal and Slovenia.
- Greece as a lower relative share in the current snapshot.
- Because 2021-2027 is still incomplete, these indications should be read cautiously.

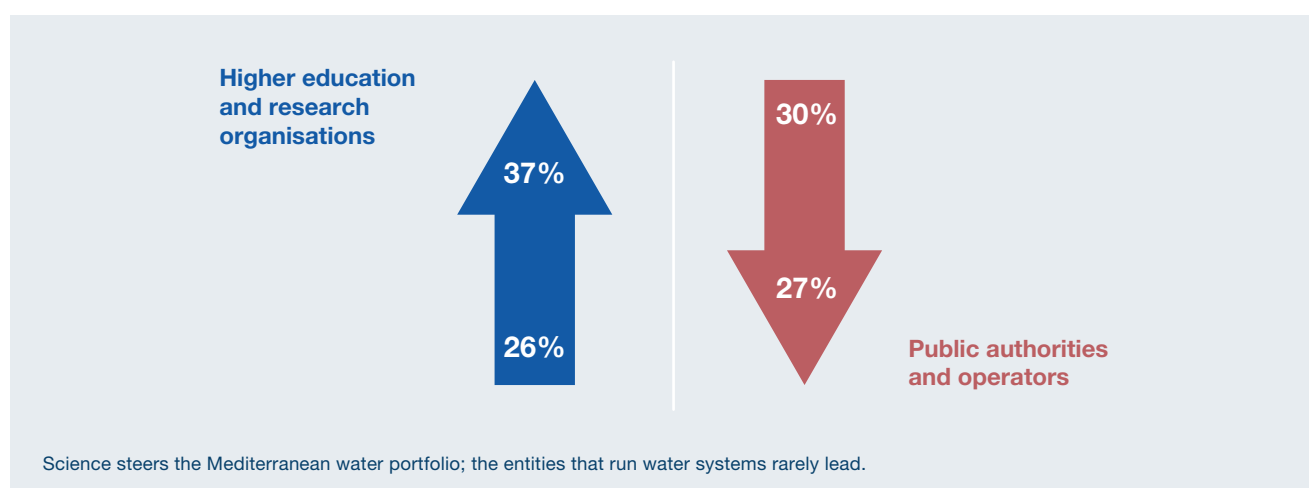
Source: uploaded KEEP.eu partner sheets.

Note: 2021-2027 data is incomplete and reflects projects reported to KEEP.eu so far.

Most active regions (NUTS2)	Country	Participations 14–20	Participations 21–27*	Leads 21–27*
Jadranska Hrvatska (Adriatic Croatia)	Croatia	32	31	4
Cataluña	Spain	8	21	1
Aquitaine	France	8	21	1
Cyprus	Cyprus	21	19	2
Lazio	Italy	17	18	5
Montenegro	Montenegro	8	16	1
Sicilia	Italy	19	16	4
Andalucía	Spain	9	15	2
Veneto	Italy	15	15	3
Languedoc-Roussillon	France	3	14	2

Regions are those recorded in keep.eu for each partner; non-EU partners are reported at country level.

- The geographical centre of activity has shifted westward. Cataluña, Aquitaine, Andalucía and Languedoc-Roussillon have at least doubled their participations, supported by the dense water portfolios of SUDOE and POCTEFA. Adriatic Croatia remains the region with the highest number of participations.
- Participation is also increasing in accession countries. Bosnia and Herzegovina rose from 2 participations to 14 and Montenegro from 8 to 16, indicating growing water cooperation in territories where EU accession can provide an additional policy and investment framework.
- Greek organisations lead fewer projects than in the previous period: 31 of 97 in 2014–2020 compared with 11 of 76 today. This change should be interpreted cautiously, particularly given the missing Greece–Bulgaria data and the later contracting pace of several Greek cross-border programmes.
- Higher education and research organisations account for 26% of participations but 37% of lead-partner roles, making them the largest group of project leaders. Infrastructure and service providers, by contrast, represent 6% of participants and lead five projects. This matters for implementation after 2027, when leakage action plans, efficiency benchmarks and other measures will increasingly depend on utilities and river-basin authorities.



The Mediterranean in the wider European context

A wider keep.eu extract covering all Interreg programmes in Europe helps put the Mediterranean portfolio in context. A search of project names and descriptions for water returns 1,347 projects EU-wide for 2014–2020 and 925 so far for 2021–2027*. The lower current-period figure should again be read in light of the comparison between a closed period and one that is still being contracted.

Within that wider picture, the Mediterranean's share has increased. Mediterranean programmes accounted for 17% of Europe's water-related Interreg projects in 2014–2020 and 25% in the current period, and for 14% of the recorded budget then compared with 22% now. In absolute terms, the Mediterranean count is broadly stable (223 to 227), while the EU-wide count is lower at this point in the programming cycle.

One in four Interreg water projects in Europe is now Mediterranean. The Mediterranean's share of Interreg water cooperation has increased in the current period, strengthening its relevance to the EU water agenda.

The direction of travel is therefore relevant: the Mediterranean represents a larger share of Europe's Interreg water cooperation as the European Water Resilience Strategy moves into implementation. This strengthens the case for Mediterranean evidence to be considered in the Strategy's 2027 mid-term review.

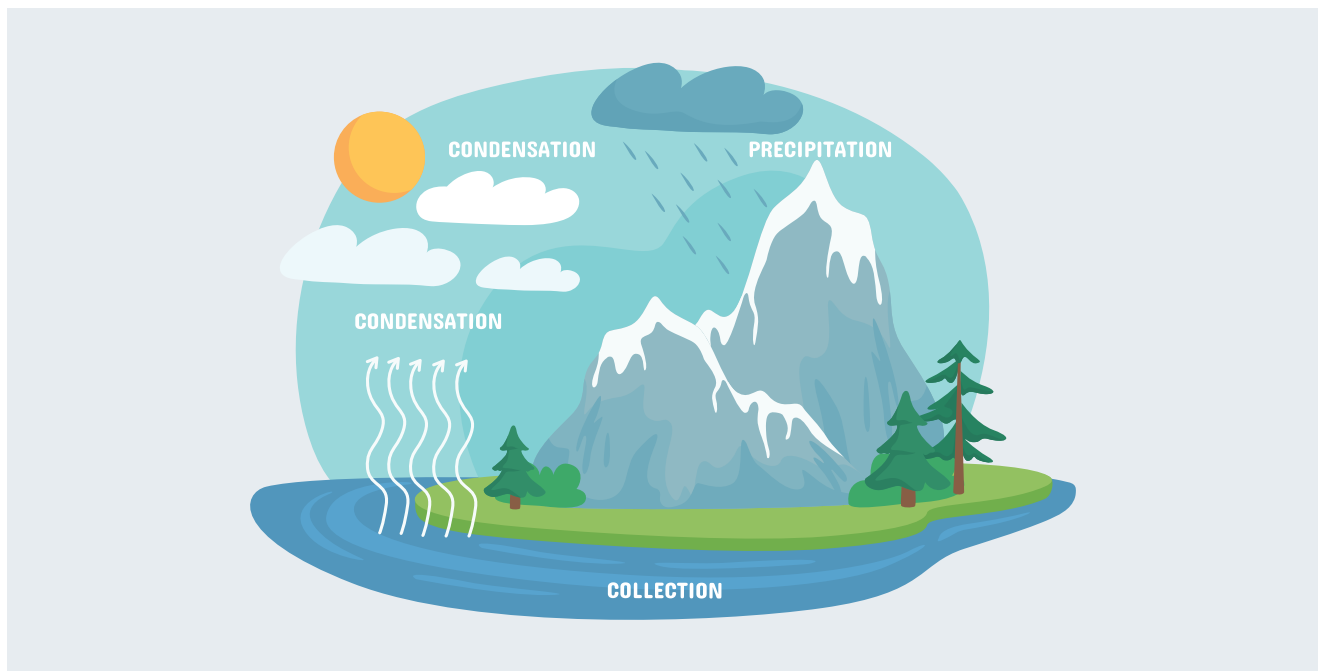
A NEW POLICY MOMENT FOR WATER IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Water has moved closer to the centre of both the European and Mediterranean policy agendas. In little more than a year, the EU adopted its first Water Resilience Strategy, the Union for the Mediterranean held its first water ministerial since 2017, and the Pact for the Mediterranean identified water resilience as a priority area. The processes below are presented as verified as of 19 August 2026.

Synergies across an increasingly connected policy landscape

These frameworks overlap in both objectives and implementation needs. They share priorities such as efficiency first, reuse, source-to-sea management and preparedness, and increasingly rely on related delivery instruments. For the seventeen Mediterranean programmes, this creates an opportunity to use one body of evidence across several policy processes: the Strategy's 2027 mid-term review, the UfM Water Agenda 2030 and the Pact's first Action Plan. The practical value of synergy here is not simply more coordination, but a shared Mediterranean evidence base that can inform several processes at once.

The following overview moves from frameworks that set strategic direction, through regional structures that can carry results across the basin, to research and financing instruments that can help take tested approaches to scale. Each provides a potential entry point for stronger links with Mediterranean Interreg results.



- **European Water Resilience Strategy** — COM(2025) 280, adopted 4 June 2025. Three objectives, five enabling areas, an EU-wide ambition of at least 10% better water efficiency by 2030, and a biennial Water Resilience Forum whose first edition met in Brussels on 8 December 2025. The mid-term review due in 2027 is the concrete window for Interreg evidence to land, and this is the anchor document for the present edition.

European Water Resilience Strategy — the three objectives

1. **Restoring and protecting the water cycle** as the basis for sustainable water supply — enforcing the existing EU water acquis, improving land water retention and tackling pollution at source, from source to sea.
2. **Building a water-smart economy** together with citizens and economic actors — water efficiency first, reuse, modern infrastructure and a competitive EU water industry, with an EU-wide goal of improving water efficiency by at least 10% by 2030.
3. **Securing clean and affordable water and sanitation for all** at all times, and empowering citizens for water resilience.

Five enabling areas carry more than fifty concrete actions: governance and implementation; finance, investment and infrastructure; digitalisation and artificial intelligence; research, innovation, water industry and skills; and security and preparedness. A Water Resilience Forum meets every two years, and the mid-term review is due in 2027.

- **UfM Water Ministerial Declaration** — Rome, 24–25 March 2026, the first since 2017. Five agreed regional priorities across 43 member states: water governance and integrated water resources management; the Water–Energy–Food–Ecosystems (WEFE) Nexus; water finance and investment in resilient infrastructure; digitalisation of the water sector; and water and climate resilience — backed by three adopted strategic frameworks. It is the clearest north–south channel for Mediterranean project results.
- **Pact for the Mediterranean** — adopted by the Commission in October 2025 and launched with Southern partners on 28 November 2025. Its first Action Plan, of April 2026, names water resilience among the priority areas, giving north–south water cooperation a political frame it has lacked since the previous programming period.
- **EU Strategy for Islands** — COM(2026) 520, adopted 10 June 2026. Water scarcity runs through its pillars, and island water projects such as WATERISE, Med H2 and DIG.I.WATER sit precisely at the junction of the islands and water agendas — the overlap the companion MedLab edition on islands examines in full.
- **European Ocean Pact** — launched in Nice in June 2025. It anchors the source-to-sea approach the Water Resilience Strategy adopts: what rivers carry, the sea receives. For Mediterranean programmes it connects freshwater results to the marine portfolio rather than leaving the two on separate tracks.
- **UfM Climate Action Plan for the Mediterranean** — development launched by 43 countries at the 3rd UfM Mediterranean Green Week, 30 June–3 July 2026. The region’s first joint climate plan, complementing the UfM Water Agenda 2030 and the natural home for the drought-and-flood evidence the portfolio generates.
- **European Climate Resilience and Risk Management framework (ECRRM)** — successor to the announced European Climate Adaptation Plan, expected from the Commission in the second half of 2026. Not yet adopted; worth tracking, since water-related risk is the strand where Mediterranean programmes have the deepest project base.

- **Macro-regional and sea-basin frameworks** — two structures give Mediterranean water cooperation a wider governance home. The **EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR)** carries water mainly through its pillar on environmental quality, which addresses marine pollution, land-based pressures and habitat protection across the basin — the natural route for source-to-sea results from projects such as AQUA, WATERLINK and MoWaCLIM, and the same route the IPA ADRION thematic clusters already use. **The WestMED Initiative** — for the sustainable development of the blue economy in the western Mediterranean, bringing together five EU Member States and five southern partners — reaches water through its priorities on marine pollution, coastal resilience and biodiversity, where wastewater treatment, reuse and land-based discharges determine the state of coastal waters. Both are recognised in the UfM blue-economy process, which makes them practical channels for carrying Interreg results into north–south dialogue.
- **Research partnerships** — **PRIMA**, the Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area, funds water-management research jointly with southern-shore countries under Horizon Europe, and the EU Mission **Restore our Ocean and Waters** carries the source-to-sea agenda across river basins and sea basins alike. Both work upstream of Interreg, on the science; Interreg works downstream, on whether it survives contact with a territory.
- **European Investment Bank** has planned over €15 billion of financing for water in 2025–2027, alongside a new Sustainable Water Advisory Facility to build a pipeline of investable projects. The constraint on that pipeline is not capital but bankable, de-risked solutions: exactly what a decade of Interreg pilots, uptake contracts and utility partnerships has been producing.
- **2026 UN Water Conference** — Abu Dhabi, 8–10 December 2026, co-hosted by Senegal and the United Arab Emirates, with six interactive dialogues including Water for Planet, source to sea, and Investments for Water. The global horizon against which the European and Mediterranean processes above will be read.

Taken together, these frameworks create a policy environment that needs practical delivery mechanisms. Interreg can contribute tested solutions, established partnerships and local knowledge from the territories where implementation takes place. The value of MedLab is to help seventeen programmes present that experience coherently, so that individual project results can feed into wider Mediterranean and European processes.

Further reading

- **European Environment Agency: Europe’s state of water 2024** — territorial evidence on the ecological and chemical status of Europe’s waters, and the sectoral shares of consumption cited throughout.
- **Action Plan for the Mediterranean WEFE Nexus Strategy** — the source-to-sea Water–Energy–Food–Ecosystems framework adopted ahead of the UfM Ministerial, and the clearest regional bridge for Interreg results.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR INTERREG

The Mediterranean is among the regions most exposed to water stress, while European and Mediterranean policy frameworks are placing greater emphasis on water resilience. Across two programming periods, the screened Interreg portfolio includes 173 water-relevant projects, offering practical experience that can inform implementation of the Water Resilience Strategy and future programme priorities. The opportunity is to connect that evidence more systematically to policy processes, including the Strategy’s 2027 mid-term review and preparations for 2028–2034.

“Water scarcity, pollution, the inland waterways — this is not only an emerging issue, but really an emergency. Interreg may help Member States and partner countries learn from each other to address it.”

— Jean-Pierre Halkin, DG REGIO

HIGHLIGHTS FROM PRACTITIONERS

Selected statements from the MedLab Thematic Week water session on project implementation, programme coordination and the future of cohesion policy for water.



Barbara Sarnari

Vice-President, SVI.MED (URWAN, NAWAMED, MEDWAYCAP)

“Water is never abstract — it is always local in its quality, availability and use. It depends on geography, climate, infrastructure, governance, culture. And that is exactly why cooperation on water is complex and, at the same time, so necessary.”

Barbara Sarnari

Vice-President, SVI.MED

“In Europe we still flush drinking water down the toilet — and it doesn’t shock us. Water systems are designed to be invisible, and their invisibility normalises waste. Sooner or later, any serious discussion about water becomes a discussion about regeneration — social, territorial, ecological.”

Veljko Srzić

University of Split (MoST, SeCure, SWAMrisk, MoWaCLIM)

“When we come to the response of the stakeholders, and especially the politicians, the situation is not so happy. There is always an existing study, an existing strategy, an action plan — but more coordination at regional and local level with the programmes would be appreciated.”

Roula Khadra

CIHEAM Bari (MENAWARA, MEDWAYCAP, PROTECHMED)

“We formalised the Memorandum of Understanding — but its implementation requires dedicated institutional focal points, integration into national planning cycles, budgetary alignment and joint monitoring. These remain uneven across signatories, and this cannot be solved within a project. We felt a lot of capitalisation fatigue.”

Christoph Schröder

University of Málaga (Wetland4Change)

“I attended the Water Resilience Forum in Brussels in December, and I did not hear the word ‘wetland’ in any presentation or discussion. That was quite striking. Wetlands suffer the consequences of climate change — and provide nature-based solutions to it.”

Mladen Todorovic

CIHEAM Bari (MAENA)

“Do not stop at research — go and implement on the ground what can effectively and easily be implemented. No-regret actions should be the must. Use existing networks, extend them, and take a step ahead.”

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERREG

The evidence assembled in this publication shows that Mediterranean water cooperation is already testing approaches that are central to the European Water Resilience Strategy, including reuse, efficiency and nature-based flood management. One in four Interreg water projects in Europe is now Mediterranean. At the same time, the data and practitioner experience point to several gaps that could be addressed in the post-2027 period. Eight recommendations follow.



- 1 Strategic positioning.** Treat water as a strategic cooperation priority and use the Strategy's 2027 mid-term review as a concrete opportunity for input. DG REGIO has described water as moving from an emerging issue to an emergency. MedLab programmes could use the evidence assembled here to prepare a joint contribution, building on the community's previous experience with Right to Stay.



- 2 Closing the uptake gap.** Address the uptake gap structurally rather than project by project. Practitioners repeatedly described the same difficulty: results reach the end of a project but do not always enter national planning cycles, institutional responsibilities or budgets. Programmes could support follow-up mechanisms such as institutional focal points, uptake contracts and capitalisation designed from the outset around end users.



- 3 Operators in the lead.** Increase the role of operators. Research organisations lead 37% of the current portfolio, while utilities lead five projects. AQUA and ECO FLOW, both led by Acquedotto Pugliese, together with WATERLINK's utility partnership, illustrate the value of involving the organisations that will ultimately operate and maintain water systems. Future calls could encourage their participation and provide preparation support where lead-partner requirements create a barrier.



- 4 Ecosystems in the mainstream.** Bring wetlands and ecosystem-based water management further into mainstream programming. Wetland4Change's work on flood regulation and mitigation shows the type of evidence Interreg can contribute to a policy area that practitioners felt was under-represented in the wider EU debate. River Contracts also offer a potentially transferable participatory approach for shared basins.



- 5 Target under-represented areas.** Industrial water efficiency, desalination innovation, and water pricing and affordability are important Strategy priorities but have limited representation in the screened Mediterranean Interreg portfolio. These gaps could inform the thematic focus of future calls and the 2028–2034 programmes.



- 6 Reuse as a flagship contribution.** Position reuse and non-conventional water as a strong Mediterranean contribution. The MENAWARA → MEDWAYCAP → PROTECHMED sequence and the Acquedotto Pugliese reuse projects provide a substantial body of practical experience with Regulation 2020/741. Joint capitalisation ahead of the Water Reuse Regulation evaluation, due by June 2028, could help translate this experience into policy learning.



- 7 North-South cooperation.** Connect more explicitly with the UfM process launched in Rome. The Ministerial Declaration's five priorities align closely with themes already present in the Interreg portfolio. MedLab could channel relevant programme results into the WEFE Nexus, finance and digitalisation workstreams, with particular attention to projects involving southern Mediterranean partners.



- 8 Evidence base and MedLab as platform.** Strengthen the evidence base and use MedLab as the coordinating platform. The absence of current Greece–Bulgaria water projects from keep.eu at the cut-off date illustrates the limitations of incomplete data. The MedLab Annual Meeting (30 September–1 October), back-to-back with the EuroMED Water Forum in Rome, provides an opportunity for the seventeen programmes to agree a common synergies paragraph that includes water resilience and can then be reflected consistently in programme documents.

Looking ahead

The European Water Resilience Strategy asks Europe to reduce waste, increase reuse and improve cooperation across borders — all areas in which Mediterranean programmes have been working for years. Ministers met in Rome in March, the Strategy will be reviewed in 2027, and 69 Interreg water projects are currently running across the region, from the Neretva delta to agricultural fields in Lebanon.

The question practitioners leave open is not simply whether individual solutions work, but whether institutions are ready to change the systems around them. The evidence in this publication suggests that Mediterranean cooperation has already begun that process through pilots, uptake mechanisms and cross-border partnerships. The region is often presented primarily through the risks it faces; its cooperation portfolio also shows a substantial body of experience that can inform what comes next.

MEDLAB - FOR STRONGER COOPERATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN



Aerial view of the Neretva Valley, Croatia

THE SEVENTEEN MEDITERRANEAN INTERREG PROGRAMMES

- Interreg NEXT MED
- Interreg Euro-MED
- Interreg Spain–France–Andorra (POCTEFA)
- Interreg Italy–France Maritime
- Interreg SUDOE
- Interreg Italy–Malta
- Interreg Italy–Tunisia
- Interreg Italy–Croatia
- Interreg Italy–Slovenia
- Interreg Greece–Italy
- Interreg IPA Italy–Albania–Montenegro
- Interreg IPA Croatia–Bosnia and Herzegovina–Montenegro
- Interreg IPA Greece–Albania
- Interreg IPA Greece–North Macedonia
- Interreg IPA Greece–Bulgaria
- Interreg IPA Adriatic
- Interreg Greece–Cyprus

MedLab is a platform of programmes working to improve synergies across the seventeen Interreg programmes active in the Mediterranean. Launched in 2019 and co-led by DG REGIO and INTERACT/TESIM, it began with the 2021–2027 programming phase and continues through the current implementation period. WestMed and the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region are associated, and the Mediterranean Multi-Programme Mechanism (MMM) — a pilot coordination initiative launched in 2022 that now brings together ten Interreg programmes around sustainable tourism — is among its spin-offs.

Its approach is deliberately inclusive — DG REGIO, DG MARE, programme structures, managing and joint authorities, monitoring-committee members and, in some cases, project beneficiaries — connecting top-down and bottom-up. What it does: scale up project results, promote programmes to other Commission services, run thematic publications like this one, and provide a space for dialogue and innovation between transnational and cross-border programmes.

“There is demand from the programmes for MedLab to continue in the post-2027 process. The need for coordination and synergy has not diminished — if anything, it is growing.”

Jean-Pierre Halkin
DG REGIO

METHODOLOGY AND DATA NOTE

- Data were extracted from keep.eu on 19 August 2026 for the Interreg programmes of the MedLab community — seventeen in 2021–2027, eighteen in 2014–2020 including the discontinued Balkan–Mediterranean programme — using a free-text search for water across all fields in both programming periods. A second, wider extract covering all Interreg programmes in Europe, searching project names and descriptions only, provides the European comparison.
- Free-text searches return more projects than are genuinely relevant. The raw Mediterranean extracts contained 240 projects for 2014–2020 and 238 for 2021–2027, including diving parks, seaplane aerodromes and beach-promotion projects that only mention water incidentally. The term also appears in partner names, investment-priority boilerplate and lists of environmental impacts. Every project was therefore screened individually.
- Projects were retained where water management, protection, supply, treatment, reuse or governance — or a water-related risk such as floods or drought — is a stated objective or a substantive part of the work. Retained projects are reported in two categories: core water projects, where water is the main object of the project, and projects with a substantial water work package, where water is one significant component among others. The screening retained 97 projects for 2014–2020 (63 core and 34 with a water work package) and 76 for 2021–2027 (54 core and 22 with a water work package).
- Projects were excluded where water was mentioned only incidentally, as were marine-litter and microplastics projects (treated here as waste management rather than water management), coastal-erosion works, purely maritime activities and generic climate-adaptation projects without an explicit water strand. Because the search is based on free text, some genuinely water-relevant projects may be missing if the word water does not appear in indexed fields. A broader definition including marine litter and coastal erosion would add roughly eight to ten projects per period.
- Themes are self-assigned by programmes when projects are recorded in keep.eu, with up to three themes per project. A project may therefore appear under more than one theme and theme totals can exceed project totals. The classification is best read as an indication of how projects are framed rather than a complete description of what they do; this is why the thematic comparison is presented as a change in framing.
- Financial figures refer to total project budgets as recorded in keep.eu, not amounts paid. Table columns may not sum exactly to the stated totals because of rounding. The 2014–2020 period is closed, while 2021–2027 is a mid-period snapshot in which 69 of the 76 retained projects were still ongoing at the cut-off date and further calls remained to be contracted. Comparisons between the two periods should therefore be interpreted with caution, and current-period figures should be treated as a minimum rather than a final count.
- Two coverage gaps reinforce that caution. The 2021–2027 Greece–Bulgaria programme returned no projects in the extract, and several projects presented by practitioners do not appear, most likely because they were contracted after the extract or are still pending data entry.
- The figures can be reproduced and updated by filtering keep.eu by programme, programming period and text search.

USEFUL LINKS

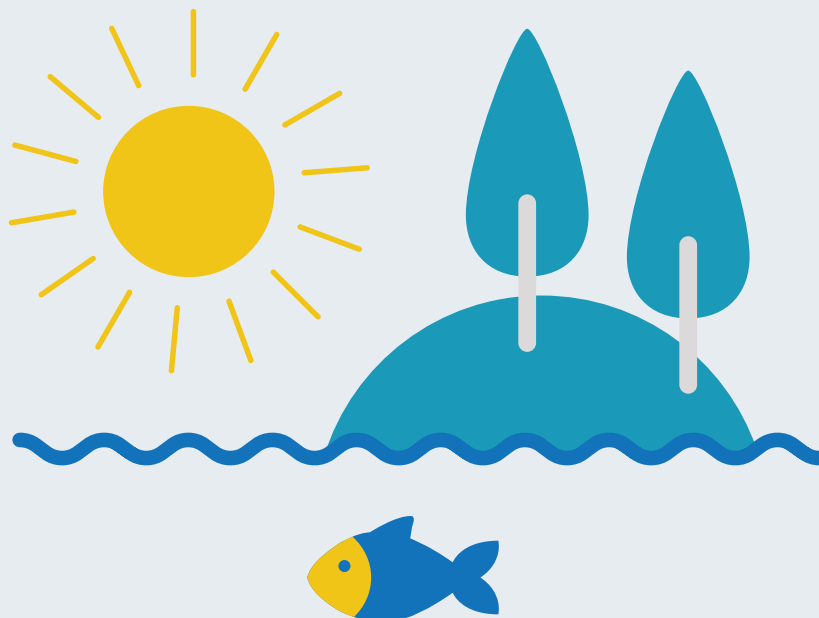
keep.eu — the database behind every figure in this publication.

Interact library — where the MedLab Thematic Week materials and previous editions of MedLab Thematic Talks are published.

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Disclaimer: Cooperation can be complex, and while Interact's job is to make it easier, Interact cannot offer assurances on the accuracy of its pan-European information in any specific context. Understanding evolves throughout the programming period. If you spot something out of date or inconsistent, please contact communication@interact.eu.



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