

## THE RIGHT TO WATER: LIBYA

### CASE STUDY

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Independent consultant, analyst and researcher



This report is published as part of the Arab NGO Network for Development's Arab Watch Report on Economic and Social Rights (AWR) series. The AWR is a periodic publication by the Network and each edition focuses on a specific right and on the national, regional and international policies and factors that lead to its violation. The AWR is developed through a participatory process which brings together relevant stakeholders, including civil society, experts in the field, academics, and representatives from the government in each of the countries represented in the report, as a means of increasing ownership among them and ensuring its localization and relevance to the context.

The seventh edition of the Arab Watch Report focuses on the right to water. It was developed to provide a comprehensive and critical analysis of the status of this right across the region, particularly in the context of climate change and its growing impacts. The information and analyses presented aim to serve as a platform for advocacy toward the realization of this fundamental right for all.

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# 01

## INTRODUCTION

Libya's water security landscape is not only shaped by geographical factors but also by political dynamics that have significantly influenced the country's water reality. Although Libya's economy is heavily dependent on fossil fuels as its main source of revenue, the country is also rich in vast fossil-water aquifers, mainly non-renewable, which were discovered alongside oil in the 1950s. This abundance led to the country's reliance on groundwater given its limited surface water resources and absence of rivers.<sup>1</sup> In addition, rainfall is restricted to specific areas along the northern coastline, and demand exceeds the supply from renewable sources, placing further pressure on non-renewable sources.<sup>2</sup> As a result, Libya faces a pressing challenge in managing its water resources effectively, requiring urgent attention and strategic interventions.

The country's natural resources allowed Libya to become one of the influential states in Africa and the MENA region. After seizing power in 1969, Muammar Gaddafi significantly reshaped Libya's political landscape and implemented policies focused on controlling its natural resources. The regime quickly made water a part of its large-scale "mega-projects," emphasizing costly infrastructure initiatives such as the Great Manmade River Project (GMMRP) – a massive water engineering undertaking in the early 1980s.<sup>3</sup> The fall of the regime in 2011

and the ensuing political crisis exposed the fragility of these projects, structurally, politically, and economically. Moreover, water availability and accessibility became increasingly at risk because of the volatile political situation, posing a direct threat to people's livelihoods and their fundamental right to water.

This paper aims to examine the root causes of the deterioration of the right to water by analysing the legal, institutional, and political factors that limit this fundamental right. By reviewing the main legal and institutional frameworks that govern water resources in Libya, the study seeks to highlight the existing challenges in water management that exacerbate these limitations, including fragmented governance, weak regulatory frameworks, poor implementation of regulations, and overlapping mandates among water institutions. The paper also assesses whether current frameworks adequately reflect and uphold the principles of the right to water.

The paper will analyse the role of Libya's political instability and conflict in shaping the right to water, through social factors and tribal dynamics and their impact on facilitating or complicating accessibility to water, as well as how they exacerbate inequities in access and service delivery. It will equally evaluate the role of large water infrastructures, specifically the GMMRP,

<sup>1</sup> Bashir Brika. 2019. The water crisis in Libya: causes, consequences, and potential solutions. *Desalination and Water Treatment* 167. 351–358. [link](#)

<sup>2</sup> IFRC. 2023. Libya Climate Fact Sheet. [link](#)

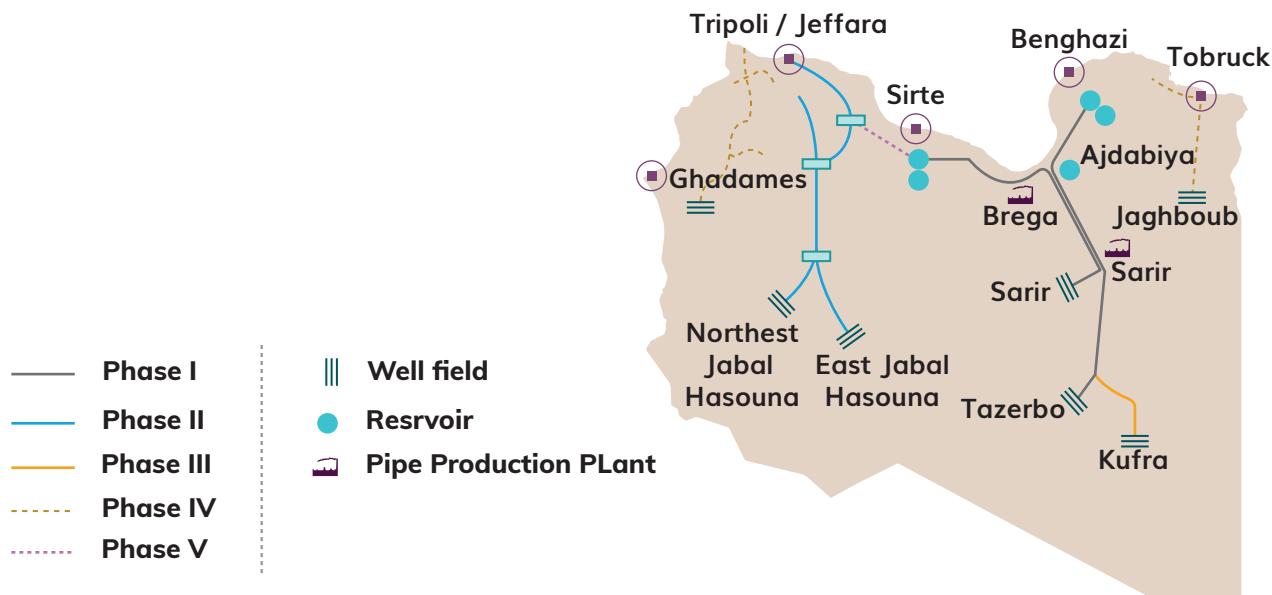
<sup>3</sup> Jauda R. Jouda Hamad, Marlia M. Hanafiah, Wan Zuhairi W. Yaakob. 2017. Water Resources Management in Libya: Challenges and Future Prospects. *Malaysian Journal of Sustainable Agriculture*, 1(2):02-05. [link](#)

in promoting water security and ensuring access to water. Finally, the paper will provide policy recommendations informed by the stakeholders' consultation dialogue held in Libya in October 2025, which focused on the right to water, offering insights into people's perceptions, highlighting challenges, and providing opportunities for sharing ideas and opinions.

# 02

## BACKGROUND: WATER INFRASTRUCTURE AND POLITICAL POWER IN LIBYA

Figure 1: Map of GMMRP Networks<sup>4</sup>



Libya has long experienced an “invisible and strategically controlled” form of water scarcity. Under Gaddafi’s regime, the country’s resources were not viewed solely as development assets or a source of “easy” gains, but also as a strategic political tool for state-building and control. This began with the development of massive water engineering infrastructures, specifically the Great Manmade River Project (GMMRP), which strongly reflected these concepts of

power and status, beyond the added value it would bring to citizens.

Today, 90 percent of Libya’s water supply is drawn from fossil groundwater aquifers,<sup>5</sup> with the GMMRP remaining the backbone of the national water infrastructure. This project was designed to transport large volumes of water from deep fossil groundwater aquifers in southern Libya to the northern coastline, where more than 80

<sup>4</sup> Amtawaa, Abraheem & S, KHALID & IKRAIAM, A.F.. (2024). African Journal of Advanced Pure and Applied Sciences (AJAPAS) Assessing the Feasibility of Harnessing Hydropower from Libya's Artificial River Drinking Pipes: A Renewable Energy Opportunity. [Link](#)

<sup>5</sup> Hamad, Salah & Fensham, Rod. 2025. Groundwater: An Important Resource of Urban Water Supply in Libya. 10.1007/978-3-031-80920-0\_3. [Link](#)

percent of the Libyan population resides, while also supporting agriculture.<sup>6</sup> However, this heavy dependence on the GMMRP ignored other key water infrastructures, such as dams and seawater desalination plants. For example, the existing desalination plants suffer from irregular maintenance and therefore cannot meet growing demand for water, especially in areas not connected to the GMMRP network. Libya has a total of 18 dams with a combined storage capacity of 375 million m<sup>3</sup>.<sup>7</sup> Yet their capacity is significantly lower due to design flaws, aging structures and lack of regular maintenance.

Following the fall of Gaddafi's regime, the GMMRP – the country's primary system for transporting freshwater – has faced significant destabilisation due to repeated attacks by armed groups and individuals. These incidents have included acts of sabotage and theft of electrical transformers, pipes, and control and operation equipment.<sup>8</sup> Since 2011, such disruptions have repeatedly interrupted freshwater supplies to many regions and urban centres, threatening the population's access to water – a fundamental human right.

From an institutional standpoint, the former regime had established critical water-management bodies within a highly top-down and centralised governance framework. This structure made resource management heavily reliant on the state, leaving little space for active citizen participation. Nonetheless, Libya's political transformation shifted the position of key infrastructure, including the GMMRP, from being a symbol of state power to its original role as a service provider struggling to function under political insecurity and heightened uncertainty. Against growing conflict and political instability, both water accessibility and availability came under

increasing strain.

As a result, many areas across Libya suffered a drastic decline in water availability and accessibility. This deterioration highlighted how the fall of the regime exposed deeper water vulnerabilities, revealing the extent to which institutional weaknesses and governance challenges heavily contributed to water insecurity, as water management exclusively depended on the state.

<sup>6</sup> Malak Altaeb and Omar Sheira. 2024. A survey of Libya's environmental challenges. Luiss Mediterranean Platform. [Link](#)

<sup>7</sup> African Development Bank Group. Defining a new approach to water management in Libya: issues and options. [Link](#)

<sup>8</sup> Libya Tribune. 2021. Vandalism threatens large man-made river that supplies the country. [Link](#)

# 03

## WATER PROJECTS AS INSTRUMENTS FOR SECURING POLITICAL ALLEGIANCE

During the 1970s, the former regime in Libya heavily invested in agricultural development under the slogan of “making the desert green,” launching costly, large-scale agricultural projects across the Libyan desert. The former regime did not develop projects simply for the purpose of development. Rather, projects carried deep political intent aimed at deepening the regime’s control over natural assets and strengthening its influence over the social fabric by systematically prioritising certain regions over others. One notable example was the Kufra agricultural project, designed not only to boost agricultural production but also to provide employment opportunities, housing, and income support.<sup>9</sup>

Through extensive water-transmission networks, water was transported to regions such as the Kufra and Sabha districts, locations where delivery was expensive but where securing regional and tribal loyalty was vital to the former regime. In parallel with continuously expanding the military, Gaddafi sought protection against potential coups by cultivating tribal alliances loyal to the regime. He empowered tribes such as the Warfallah by granting them strong, strategic positions in the military.<sup>10</sup> In Libya’s political landscape, tribes hold key influence. Thus, attempts to overthrow the regime were shaped by

deep tribal divisions. A breaking point was reached in 2011, when tribes in the eastern region chose to confront the regime, while most tribes in the western regions – except Zintan – and those in the central and southern regions – apart from Awlad Suleiman – remained aligned with Gaddafi.<sup>11</sup>

From this perspective, resources such as water were used not only to consolidate political control and reinforce allegiance to the regime, but also as a means of constraining specific communities. A striking example is the Amazigh indigenous community residing in the Nafusa Mountains, a range located southwest of Tripoli and extending to the Tunisian border.<sup>12</sup> This community faced systematic oppression by the regime through restricted access to water. Although the GMMRP network reaches the region, the development of connectivity networks across the mountainous terrain was never fully implemented.

For years, the Amazigh community relied on costly tankers that delivered water on a weekly or bi-weekly basis to meet their needs, with no compensation from the authorities. After 2011, the political situation in Libya negatively affected foreign currency availability, driving fluctuations in the cost of water transported to the mountains. This situation illustrates how the

<sup>9</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Albayan. [Link](#)

<sup>11</sup> Libya Tribune. 2021. Vandalism threatens large man-made river that supplies the country. [Link](#)

<sup>12</sup> Minority Rights. 2023. Minority and Indigenous Trends 2023 - Focus on water. [Link](#)

regime used water both as a mechanism of control and a tool to pressure those communities perceived as oppositional or less loyal. In this context, the absence of adequate water services underscored how the denial of water as a fundamental human right was used by the regime to assert dominance.

# 04

## FAILED GOVERNANCE AND STAGNANT WATER MANAGEMENT IN LIBYA

Libya's failure to develop coherent short- and long-term water strategies has prevented the country from achieving water security. No progress has been made in developing alternative water resources that could reduce the country's dependence on fossil groundwater aquifers. At the same time, Libya's oil sector – historically a central driver of conflict and disputes – is significantly contributing to the ongoing power struggles in the country. After more than a decade of turmoil, water shortages have now become an increasingly urgent concern, elevating the water crisis to the forefront of the country's long list of crises, despite the fact that water can serve as a crucial instrument for diplomacy and peacebuilding.

During periods of conflict, water authorities, such as the GMMRP Authority, focused their efforts primarily on ensuring day-to-day water delivery. However, institutional fragmentation affected the functioning of many key bodies, especially as some authorities operated from the west while others were based in the east. This fragmentation also led to the absence of coordinated water-infrastructure development planning and secure funding, as well as insufficient periodic maintenance of water systems. As a consequence, Libya has been left with no effective mechanism to

respond to water shortages or withstand climate-related events such as prolonged droughts.

Under Libya's heavily centralised water governance system, the gap between state institutions and local communities has widened significantly. The role of civil society in water governance remains extremely weak. Cultural norms and institutional practices have framed water management as the sole responsibility of the government, leaving little space for local communities and civic actors to participate in the decision-making process. This exclusion could be attributed to several factors, such as the lack of institutional support to local organisations, the absence of transparency, and the state's monopoly over water-related decisions. It is important to highlight that under the existing vacuum since 2011, where water authorities failed to sustainably manage water in the country, other players appeared. This includes, for instance, some municipalities and/or private water-tanker operators making ad hoc decisions to manage the situation in certain regions.

Inherited from previous decades, Libya's water legislation does not align with modern international principles governing the right to water. According to the United

<sup>13</sup> IEEE.ES. 2020. The war in Libya and its oil resources: Order inside chaos? [Link](#)

Nations, "Access to water and sanitation are recognized as human rights – fundamental to everyone's health, dignity and prosperity. However, billions of people are still living without safely managed water and sanitation."<sup>14</sup> This recognition clearly positions water as a fundamental human right. Within this framework, to better understand water policy issues in Libya, it is important to further analyse water laws and legislations to identify the role of legal mechanisms in potentially contributing to water insecurity. Rights-based approaches can facilitate a more comprehensive analysis of water challenges and guide recommendations that integrate both technical solutions and appropriate legal instruments.

<sup>14</sup> United Nations. Human Rights to Water and Sanitation: [Link](#)

# 05

## WATER LAWS AND EXISTING GAPS: A THEORETICAL RIGHT TO WATER IN LIBYA

The development of legislation on the management of water resources in Libya began under the Monarchy in the 1950s. Following the 1969 coup, the former regime either repealed existing laws or introduced new ones. For example, Regulation No. 1 of 1960, which governed drinking water resources, was cancelled.<sup>15</sup> Many subsequent laws focused on establishing new authorities to manage water resources, promoting alternative solutions, and regulating water and sanitation utilities. In the 1970s, a number of decrees addressed the development of desalination plants, including law No. 123 of 1972, which provided for the construction of five desalination plants in Tobruk, Zliten, Ben Jawad, Sousse, and Zawiya, as part of the broader Tripartite Development Plan.<sup>16</sup> These legal instruments aimed both to manage the existing water resources and to support agricultural expansion.

Additionally, Law No.3 of 1982 on the Regulation of the Exploitation of Water Resources – comprising twelve articles – stated in Article 1 that “Water is a partnership between people, and everyone is committed to conserving water and not using it excessively.” Article 2 declared that “Water resources in the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya belong to the

people, and water sources mean, in the application of the provisions of this law, all natural water resources, whether surface or groundwater.”<sup>17</sup>

Another key piece of legislation is Decree No. 386 of 1998, which issued the Executive Regulations of Law No. 7 of 1982 on the Protection of the Environment. In Chapter 4, dedicated to protecting water sources from pollution, Article 74 states: “The water resources of the Great Jamahiriya belong to the people, and access to safe drinking water is a natural right of every citizen.”<sup>18</sup> This clause explicitly recognises water as a fundamental right to every citizen and describes it as the property of all people. However, despite such legal provisions emphasising water conservation and citizens’ entitlement to water, access to water as a basic human right has not been effectively implemented.

The last legislation issued before 2011 was in 2003,<sup>19</sup> introducing some provisions on the regulation of water and sanitation services under the General Company for Water and Sanitation. Subsequently, a 2012 decree renamed the Public Authority for Water as the Water Authority and affiliated it to the Public Authority for Water Resources.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> [Link](#)

<sup>16</sup> Libyan Law Society. Law No. 123 of 1972. [Link](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Link](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Link](#)

<sup>19</sup> Libyan Law Society. Decree No. 25 of 2003. [Link](#)

<sup>20</sup> [Link](#)

Despite the numerous decrees and legislative measures developed around the governance of water, enforcement remains extremely weak, compounded by pervasive corruption and the complex political environment. Although water is explicitly recognised as a human right at the legislative level, a significant gap exists between theory and application. As a result, citizens are often unable to claim their right to water through legal mechanisms when authorities and governing bodies fail to provide it. The weak enforcement of laws, combined with political influence over water management in Libya, has contributed to systemic shortcomings affecting accessibility, availability, and affordability.

Furthermore, inequities between rural and urban areas persist at the service level, where priority is given to metropolitan centres such as Benghazi and Tripoli, due to their concentrated economic activity and population density. Meanwhile, rural areas still suffer from limited services, including access to water. This disparity exacerbates the existing inequalities in water access.

## ■ AVAILABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

Under the availability clause of the United Nations framework, Libya demonstrates a clear imbalance between water availability and accessibility. While the GMMRP was ostensibly developed to provide water to the entire population, the massive infrastructure project did not deliver on this goal. The regime emphasised self-sufficiency through one of its most famous slogans, stating "There is no freedom for a people who eat from beyond their borders." However, the project had not fulfilled this claim. Marginalised groups and indigenous communities have struggled with the accessibility and availability of water, dating back to Gaddafi's rule. The

This is observed, for example, in the Nafusa Mountains of Libya, where populations have long relied on water delivered by tankers, often at rising costs.

Since 2011, political fragmentation has resulted in managerial dysfunction and unequal distribution of resources. Ongoing conflict, combined with increasing political and economic instability, has demonstrated the extent to which water infrastructure can be deliberately targeted during periods of unrest. For instance, during the 2011 revolution, forces affiliated with the regime cut the water supply to Tripoli,<sup>21</sup> and in 2019, the Haftar attack on Tripoli targeted key components of the GMMRP, further restricting water availability and access.<sup>22</sup> Similar incidents across the country highlight the persistent gaps in fulfilling the right to water as defined by the United Nations framework, regarding availability, quality, accessibility, affordability, and non-discrimination. The following section aims to analyse these framework elements from a right-based lens.

situation has continued to worsen since, especially during periods of conflict, when alternative sources like water tankers are less available due to main road blockages.

The current institutional frameworks do not guarantee long-term water availability and accessibility due to damage to existing infrastructure and the lack of a long-term vision and strategic planning. They also underscore the importance of water provision but completely ignore practical mechanisms to ensure its availability and accessibility. Thus, reliance on a single water source to meet the growing population's needs threatens the sustainability

<sup>21</sup> Reuters. 2011. Gaddafi forces cut off Tripoli water supply. [Link](#)

<sup>22</sup> Aljazeera. 2019. Libya armed group cuts off water supply to Tripoli. [Link](#)

ity of these resources and their long-term availability. With no alternative water solutions, such as desalination and wastewater

treatment facilities, both the availability and accessibility of water remain under severe threat.

## ■ AFFORDABILITY

Water affordability is another critical issue despite the long-standing portrayal of water as a free commodity. It was one aspect of the former regime's manipulations: providing water to the population free of charge. In areas served by the GMMRP, the government in fact covered the cost by applying subsidies and leveraging oil revenue. Periods of unrest and

heightened uncertainty, however, exposed the limits of "free" services, with people paying the price. For example, the vibrant suburban area of Tajoura in Tripoli has no access to the municipal water supply and sewage infrastructure, leaving households to bear the full cost of water, with no compensation from the government.<sup>23</sup>

## ■ ABSENCE OF DATA AND INFORMATION SHARING

From a technical perspective, the lack of up-to-date data represents a major challenge for water governance. There is no publicly accessible data platform that provides citizens with comprehensive information on water access by region, water quality, or categorisation by source and use. The absence of current data and information systems across various fields, including water, hinders effective water distribution, maintenance, and the planning of expansion projects.

Without a clear and updated water information infrastructure, identifying and addressing existing gaps in water access becomes extremely difficult, creating a vacuum and a blind spot in governance. The lack of reliable data also undermines the development of evidence-based water policies and solutions. Without timely and accurate information, it becomes impossible to assess and compare progress, which is crucial for measuring improvements and analysing risks. From a legal perspective, this lack of data runs against the principles of transparency.

<sup>23</sup> Brika, Bashir & Ghuila, Huda & Mosbah, Hanan. (2018). MUNICIPAL WATER SHORTAGE AND RELATED WATER ISSUES IN THE CITY OF TAJOURA: A CASE STUDY TO RAISE PUBLIC AWARENESS. Water Conservation & Management. 33-35. 10.26480/wcm.02.2018.33.35. [Link](#)

# 06

## ABSENCE OF LOCALLY LED CONTRIBUTION IN WATER AFFAIRS

As noted earlier, the former regime systematically diminished and eliminated the role of local communities in addressing and advocating for solutions to issues directly affecting society. Through authoritarian control, the government sent a direct message that it alone had the authority to manage resources and provide services, leaving no room for active public consultation. While the former regime used the social committees of Al-Jamahiriya to conduct nominal consultations, these processes were not applied in decision-making or in the development of projects.

Against the ongoing water crisis in Libya, the inclusion of CSOs and community-led initiatives is not optional but essential. Following the development of Libya's civil society after 2011, local organisations – despite limited capacities and challenging conditions – have addressed water needs through humanitarian interventions, such as distribution and small-scale maintenance during periods of unrest. However, the concentration on humanitarian efforts can obscure the human-rights dimension of water. It prevents building long-term community awareness and understanding of the required tools and approaches during periods of political instability. Meaningful community engagement in awareness programs and in the manage-

ment of water resources through a rights-based approach is therefore critical; its absence weakens community ownership and increases marginalisation.

# 07

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Applying a human-rights lens to water in Libya under this study allowed for a clearer understanding of the country's water situation and crises, providing an in-depth perspective to tackle this issue comprehensively. The analysis highlighted the persistent and systemic challenges arising from policies and legislation. It also demonstrated that the mere existence of policies does not ensure coherent implementation.

Failure to enforce water laws actively neglects water as a fundamental human right. Based on a review of existing laws, regulations, and frameworks, and further enriched by consultations conducted with Libyan stakeholders, the following recommendations are proposed to address these issues:

- Revising water legislation is a crucial step in ensuring that current laws effectively protect and promote human rights related to water access and quality. This step must include a detailed review of existing regulations by a designated legal committee to identify any gaps and inconsistencies that may hinder equitable access to water resources. Similarly, authorities must develop a large-scale, inclusive national consultation with the public, and relevant stakeholders must be consulted to ensure that people's water needs are considered and clearly incorporated into the revision process. The revision

process must ensure the inclusion of a clear definition of accountability mechanisms that define water as a fundamental human right, which could allow people to access water under legal protection.

- Develop a unified water authority to eliminate the imbalance and duplication of decisions often observed in water management authorities in Libya. A centralised authority would ensure that existing resources are addressed in sustainable and equitable ways, while upholding human rights principles in their accessibility and conservation. It would streamline operations and foster collaboration among stakeholders to develop the necessary strategies for water management, especially in the face of climate change's impact on fossil groundwater aquifers.
- Create a robust and enabling environment that encourages diverse stakeholders, such as the private sector and local NGOs, to actively participate and contribute to managing water resources in Libya. Private-sector involvement is essential, as it can develop crucial solutions to address the multiple challenges in the water sector, particularly in decentralised water management and desalination. The private sector, when enabled, can contribute to enhancing existing tech-

nologies and strategies not only from a technical perspective but also from an operational and financial perspective.

- It is essential to connect water legislation and laws to their enforcement by establishing a subcommittee at the municipal and ministerial levels. This can provide the necessary oversight and ensure that these laws and regulations are effectively enforced. At the same time, it is important to limit tribal and regional pressures in how these laws and legislations are translated into reality. This could be achieved by increasing people's awareness of their right to water.
- Specific revisions on unconventional water resources planning and development in Libya must be prioritised. Authorities must not only focus on water resource diversification, such as desalination and water reuse, from technical and economic perspectives, but also consider legal enhancements to ensure these solutions are adequately developed and to ensure the availability, accessibility, and affordability of water for all citizens equally.



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