



# Sustainable urban drainage systems and integrated water resources management: a pathway to achieving sustainable water management

Arne Finger<sup>1\*</sup>, Jonas Lutz<sup>1</sup>, Putu Aryastana<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Hamm-Lippstadt University of Applied Sciences, Marker Allee 76-78, Hamm, 59063, Germany

<sup>2</sup>Department of Civil Engineering Warmadewa University, Tanjung Bungkak, Denpasar, 80239, Indonesia

\*[arnefinger1@gmail.com](mailto:arnefinger1@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) is an essential approach for achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 6: "Clean Water and Sanitation." This study explores the role of IWRM in supporting sustainable water management in Germany, a country renowned for its advanced environmental policies and innovative water management systems. By aligning with the European Union's Water Framework Directive (WFD), Germany implements comprehensive strategies that integrate environmental protection, stakeholder collaboration, and transboundary water management. Key initiatives such as the Rhine River Restoration Project and the Danube Floodplain Restoration demonstrate Germany's success in applying IWRM principles to improve water quality, restore ecosystems, and enhance flood resilience. Despite its progress, challenges remain, including agricultural runoff, industrial impacts, and climate change-induced risks. Recommendations for improving Germany's IWRM include expanding data collection systems, strengthening pollution controls, promoting circular water economies, enhancing climate resilience, and increasing public engagement. Ultimately, Germany's IWRM framework provides a model for sustainable water management globally, illustrating how collaborative governance, innovation, and adaptive strategies can support the achievement of SDG 6 and broader sustainable development objectives.

**Keywords:** Integrated Water Resources Management, SDG 6, Clean Water and Sanitation, Germany

## 1 Introduction

Water is one of the most critical natural resources on Earth, playing a pivotal role in addressing 21st-century challenges such as urbanization, climate change, and environmental degradation. Recent studies indicate that approximately two-thirds of the global population experiences water scarcity for more than a month each year, with about half a billion people facing year-round scarcity [1]. The importance of sustainable water resource management is underscored in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 6: "Clean Water and Sanitation" [2]. This goal focuses on ensuring universal access to clean water, improved sanitation, and the sustainable management of water resources by 2030[3]. The urgency of achieving these targets becomes more critical as climate change is projected to account for about 20% of anticipated increases in

global water scarcity [4], while environmental degradation continues to diminish watershed capacity to retain and filter water [5].

To address these critical water management challenges and achieve SDG 6 targets, two key strategies stand out: Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS) and Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM). While SUDS provide innovative solutions to urban water challenges, IWRM ensures a coordinated, cross-sectoral approach to managing water resources [6]. These approaches address the limitations of conventional water management methods, which often fail to incorporate changing dynamics of rainfall patterns and urbanization [7]. Together, these approaches create a comprehensive framework for achieving sustainable water management, offering more resilient solutions compared to traditional methods that typically

prioritize short-term solutions over long-term sustainability [8].

Germany serves as an exemplary case, demonstrating how SUDS and IWRM can work in tandem to address water-related challenges. The country's water management practices are recognized to be 20-30 years ahead of other developed nations like England [9], particularly in implementing integrated solutions that align with both SUDS and IWRM principles [10]. This success is largely attributed to Germany's "light version" of IWRM implementation through the European Union's Water Framework Directive, which effectively coordinates various water-related sectors while maintaining flexibility in implementation [10].

This research explores the roles of SUDS and IWRM in achieving sustainable development, highlights successful initiatives in Germany, and provides recommendations for enhancing their implementation. The German experience particularly demonstrates how urban water challenges can be effectively addressed through a combination of technological innovation and robust policy frameworks [11], making it a valuable model for other nations seeking to implement similar sustainable water management strategies.

## 2 Sustainable Urban Drainage System (SUDS): An Urban Water Management Solution

Rapid urbanization has disrupted natural water cycles, leading to issues such as urban flooding, overburdened drainage systems, and the contamination of surface water [12]. Traditional drainage systems are often designed to remove stormwater quickly, but they struggle to handle increased rainfall intensity caused by climate change [3].

Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS) present a sustainable alternative, designed to mimic natural water processes such as infiltration, evaporation, and filtration [13], [14]. These systems aim to reduce urban water runoff, improve water quality, and enhance urban resilience [6]. Key SUDS techniques include:

1. Green Roofs: These roofs absorb rainwater, reduce runoff, improve air quality, and help mitigate urban heat islands.
2. Permeable Surfaces: Materials like porous pavements allow water to infiltrate into the ground, reducing surface water accumulation.
3. Rainwater Harvesting Systems: Storage tanks and cisterns collect excess rainwater for reuse, such as irrigation or flushing, [2].
4. Constructed Wetlands: Artificial wetlands act as natural water filters, improving water quality and supporting biodiversity [3].

5. Rain Gardens and Swales: These landscaped features promote water infiltration and increase urban green spaces [12]

In Germany, cities like Hamburg have integrated SUDS into their urban infrastructure through initiatives such as the Green Roof Strategy [13], [15]. This program encourages the installation of green roofs to reduce stormwater runoff, enhance biodiversity, and create more livable urban environments [16]. Similarly, cities like Berlin have promoted permeable pavements and rainwater harvesting systems as part of their sustainable water management strategies.

## 3 Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM): A Holistic Water Governance Framework

While SUDS focus on local urban solutions, Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) provides a broader framework for managing water resources at regional, national, and transboundary levels [14]. IWRM is a holistic approach that balances the competing demands of water across sectors such as agriculture, industry, and ecosystems [2], [6].

The principles of IWRM are based on three key pillars:

1. Efficient Water Use: Ensuring water is managed in ways that maximize social and economic benefits.
2. Environmental Sustainability: Protecting water-related ecosystems to safeguard long-term water availability [13], [12].
3. Stakeholder Participation: Engaging all relevant actors – government, industry, local communities, and civil society – to ensure inclusive and transparent decision-making [3].

Germany has been at the forefront of implementing IWRM, largely driven by the European Union Water Framework Directive (WFD) [14][16]. This directive mandates that water resources be managed based on river basin boundaries rather than administrative borders, fostering regional cooperation.

A notable success story is the Rhine River Restoration Project. In response to severe industrial pollution in the mid-20th century, Germany and other Rhine Basin countries launched the Rhine Action Program in the 1980s [3]. This initiative improved wastewater treatment, reduced industrial discharges, and restored natural habitats, resulting in a dramatic improvement in water quality and biodiversity [12][16].

Similarly, the Danube Floodplain Restoration Project focuses on restoring natural floodplains along the Danube River [6]. These floodplains provide

crucial ecosystem services, such as flood protection, water purification, and biodiversity support [2][14].

#### 4 The Synergy between UDS and IWRM

Although SUDS and IWRM address water challenges at different scales, they are highly complementary and mutually reinforcing [15]. Together, they form a comprehensive water management strategy:

1. Local Solutions with Regional Integration: SUDS address urban water challenges, while IWRM ensures these solutions align with regional water management objectives [13].
2. Improving Water Quality: SUDS filter and treat rainwater at the urban level, while IWRM protects water bodies at the catchment scale [3].
3. Climate Resilience: Both approaches help cities and regions adapt to climate change, reducing flood risks and enhancing water availability during droughts [2][14].

For example, the Donau-Auen Restoration Project integrates both principles. By restoring floodplains, the project reduces flood risks, enhances biodiversity, and improves the natural water retention capacity of the region – benefiting both urban and rural communities [12][17].

#### 5 Recommendation for improving SUDS and IWRM Implementation

To further enhance the effectiveness of SUDS and IWRM, the following strategies are recommended:

1. Enhanced Data Collection and Monitoring: Germany should invest in real-time monitoring technologies such as IoT sensors and remote sensing systems to track water quality, flow patterns, and usage [2].
2. Stronger Pollution Control Measures: Agricultural runoff remains a significant issue. Implementing stricter regulations and promoting precision farming practices can reduce nutrient pollution in water bodies [12].
3. Promotion of Water Reuse: Encouraging circular water management practices, such as wastewater recycling in urban and industrial settings, can alleviate pressure on freshwater resources.
4. Climate Adaptation Strategies: Germany should expand climate resilience measures, such as restoring wetlands, constructing natural retention areas, and integrating green infrastructure into urban landscapes [3][16].
5. Public Awareness and Education: Educational campaigns and community engagement programs can foster a culture of water conservation and sustainable water use [6].

6. Enhanced Policy Coordination: Strengthening collaboration between policymakers, urban planners, and environmental agencies is essential for aligning SUDS initiatives with IWRM objectives [13][14].

#### 6 Conclusion

The integration of Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS) and Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) provides a robust pathway to achieving sustainable water management. Germany's approach, supported by innovative projects like the Rhine and Danube restorations, showcases how these two strategies can work in harmony to address urban, regional, and trans-boundary water challenges.

However, as climate change, population growth, and pollution continue to pose risks, ongoing innovation, stakeholder collaboration, and the adoption of nature-based solutions are vital. By advancing these strategies, Germany can continue to serve as a global model for sustainable water management, contributing significantly to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The study's findings demonstrate significant progress in implementing integrated water management approaches, particularly through successful SUDS initiatives like Hamburg's Green Roof Strategy and broader IWRM frameworks. The documented improvements in water quality in the Rhine River and enhanced flood resilience in the Danube floodplains provide concrete evidence of these integrated approaches' effectiveness. Nevertheless, challenges persist, including coordination complexities, high infrastructure costs, and technical difficulties in retrofitting existing urban areas.

Looking forward, continued research and innovation will be crucial for addressing emerging challenges, including developing sophisticated monitoring systems and enhancing stakeholder engagement mechanisms. The implications of this research extend beyond water management, contributing to multiple Sustainable Development Goals. While specific solutions may require adaptation for different contexts, the fundamental principles of integration, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive management remain relevant for global water management challenges. As pressures on water resources increase worldwide, Germany's experience provides valuable insights for developing more resilient and sustainable water management systems, demonstrating that significant progress is achievable with proper planning, stakeholder engagement, and political will.

## 7 References

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