



Water Stories from EU Citizens

Water Resilience Experiment

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2025

Joint
Research
Centre

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JRC140374

PDF

ISBN 978-92-68-25677-0

doi:10.2760/3022572

KJ-01-25-180-EN-N

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2025

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How to cite this report: European Commission: Joint Research Centre, Dupoux, M., Arrigoni, O. and Hamarat, Y., Water Stories from EU Citizens, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2025, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/3022572>, JRC140374.

Water Resilience Experiment

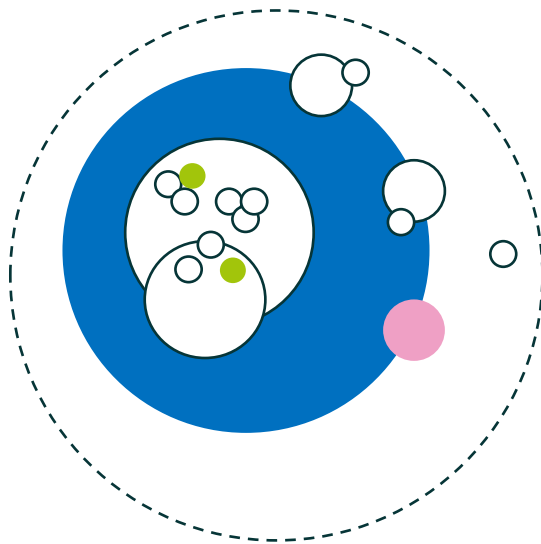
Abstract

The Water Resilience Experiment aims to contribute to the European Commission's Water Resilience Strategy through the lens of design for policy and behavioural insights. The project focused on increasing cross-DG collaboration around the water topic and reducing the policy-implementation gap by engaging stakeholders across different levels of governance. The project adopted a holistic, cross-cutting, and systemic approach. The experimentation built on various workstreams generating qualitative insights from governance across local, regional, national, and international levels. Workstreams included the collection of citizen stories, participatory research conducted by innovation labs engaging numerous regional stakeholders, an analysis of the media discourse on water in 9 EU languages, and a collection of case studies as basis for a serious game. During workshops and serious gaming sessions, 55 policymakers and over 60 scientists collaboratively analysed research outcomes using systemic and visual thinking approaches, fostering deeper insights and strengthening collaboration. We identified three essential dimensions for a comprehensive approach to water resilience: the framing of the topic, common internal organisational practices, and the interplay between EU and local knowledge in implementation. Based on these observations, the Water Resilience Experiment proposes eight transformative actions to strengthen the Commission's internal and external water resilience efforts, directed at policymakers, water-focused groups, and communities within and beyond the Commission.

See the main report of the project here: European Commission: Joint Research Centre, Arrigoni, O., Hamarat, Y. and Dupoux, M., WATER RESILIENCE EXPERIMENT, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2025, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/9430203>, JRC140148.

Workstreams Overview

What we did



Water Stories from EU Citizens

Behavioural analysis of citizens' experiences with and perception of water

Water Reflections Game

A strategic role-playing game based on concrete cases

Local Participatory Research on Water in Member States

Maturity of capacity and capabilities of local interventions and discourse

EU Water Media Discourse Analysis

Maturity of the discourse and framing of the challenge

Contents

How to navigate the report

This report deals with the analysis of water stories from citizens and stakeholders developed to support and analyse innovative policy-making at the European Commission on water under the Water Resilience Experiment led by the EU Policy Lab of the Joint Research Centre (JRC) from June 2024 to July 2025.

This report provides a visual summary of the project in a landscape format.

1. [Overview](#) (page 6)
2. [Methodology](#) (page 12)
3. [Results](#) (page 20)
4. [Insights](#) (page 45)
5. [Appendix](#) (page 54)

General note: All visuals in this report are the property of the JRC, except when stated otherwise. The analysis was conducted by Voices that Count, who generated the graphs of this report under contract with the JRC.

Overview

Workstream Overview

Aim and goals

Research Question:

How do citizens and stakeholders experience water in their life?

- Understand what makes people feel aware of the importance of water, both in personal and professional life
- Identify the drivers that shape their perceptions, thinking and behaviours/actions
- Gather their hopes and fears as regards water issues and opportunities
- Consider the heterogeneity of insights from the different EU Member States



Workstream Overview

What we did

WHAT

- Collecting real life experiences of citizens and stakeholders with water
- A listening exercise
- 2666 citizens' stories and 85 stakeholders' stories
- Analysing emergent patterns

HOW

- Prompting question: Gathering day-to-day experiences (a narrative)
- Self-signification: Inviting respondents to self-interpret their experiences or stories with a behavioural lens
- Sense-making workshop

WHO

- Citizens and stakeholders
- 27 Member States
- [Voices That Count](#): study (questions + analysis)
- [Bilendi Belgium](#): recruitment of citizens
- EU Policy Lab: Design Team + Water Team



WHY

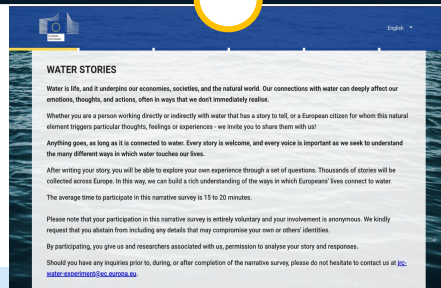
- To ensure a multi-faceted view of water issues and opportunities
- To identify behavioural patterns
- To reveal EU policies implementation barriers
- To collect creative solutions
- To inform communication strategies

Workstream Overview

What we did

Feb-Mar 24

Survey elaboration



Framing of the survey through
a behavioural lens

Back&Forth with the JRC

Apr 24

Stories collection

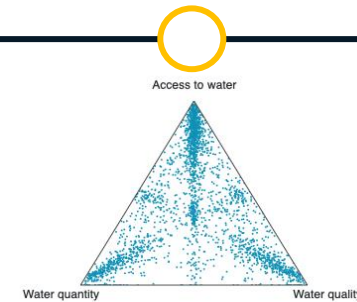


Collecting citizens' stories
through online citizen panels
Collecting stakeholders' stories
through networks of voluntary
DGs

Data Collection

May-Jun 24

Stories analysis

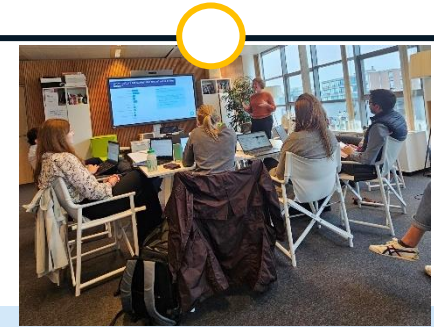


Capturing the emerging trends
and patterns

Emergent Pattern Analysis

Jun-Jul 24

Sensemaking



Gathering policymakers to
have them read the stories
and interpret their meaning
further through different
lenses

Workshop + Analysis

Workstream Overview

Our conclusions

Insight 1

Awareness of the importance of water primarily relates to health and wellbeing.

Insight 2

Concerns and motivators change depending on the surroundings and contexts. It is prominent for cross-border issues.

Insight 3

Personal beliefs and experiences largely influence people's perceptions and actions.

Insight 4

People feel they can have a significant influence on water-related situations. There is an untapped potential.

Workstream Overview

What we found out

- Stories are mostly about **health/wellbeing, recreation/tourism, housing/living conditions and environment/climate**.
- **Personal wellbeing and life experience** mostly shape perceptions, thinking and actions described in the stories. It is followed by environment and climate change concerns.
- Citizens and stakeholders believe they can influence a lot the situations described in their stories, showcasing **individual responsibility**.
- **Access to water** is predominant as what matters most in stories
- **Social and environmental consequences** stand out compared to economic consequences in stories.
- **Water availability and quality** are the two aspects that matter most to people for the sustainable use of water. Healthy nature comes third.

Methodology

Overview of the water stories methodology

Methodology

Who wrote stories

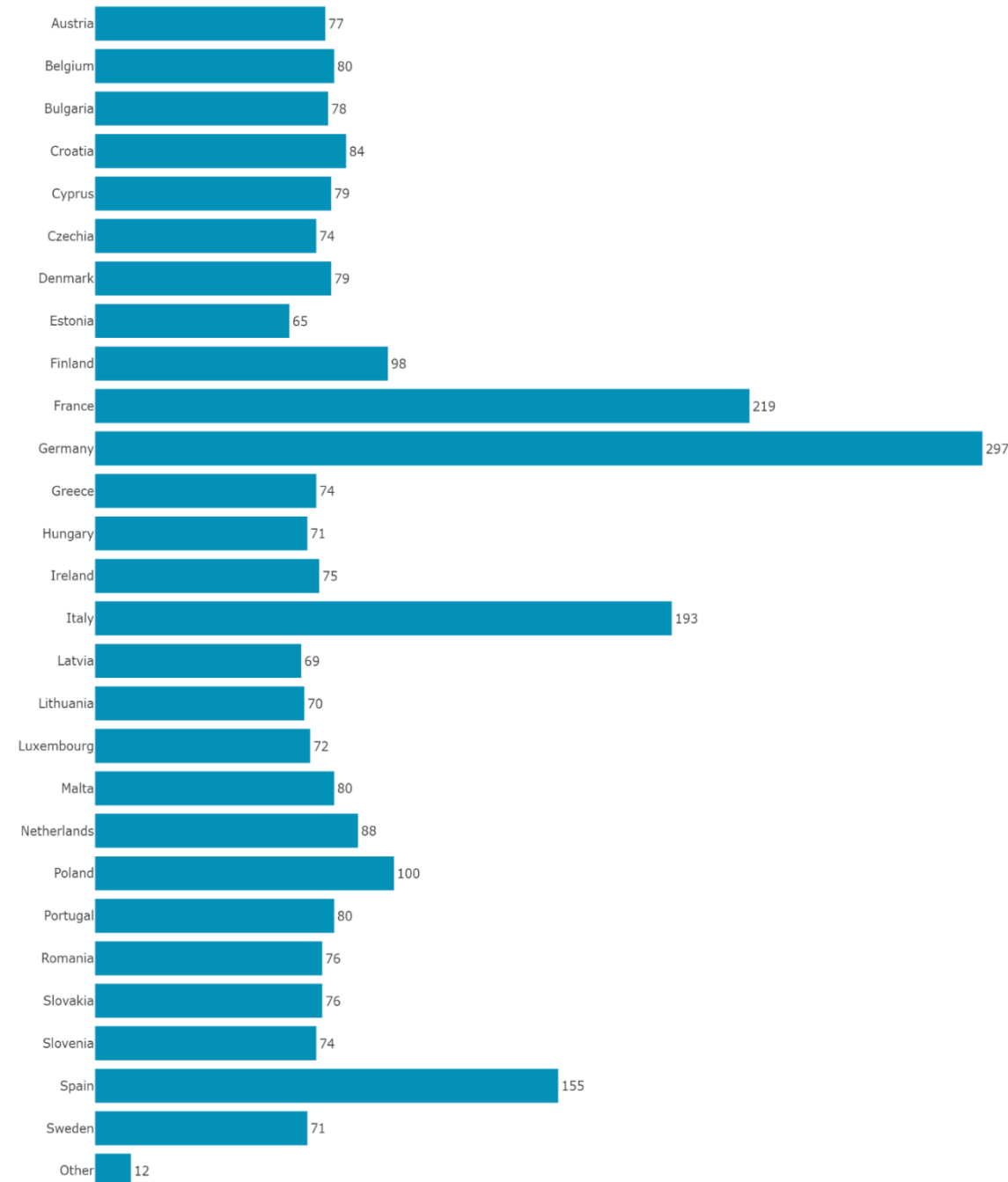
Voices: EU citizens



2666 citizens shared their story (number of stories per country to the right)

They were recruited through **citizen panels** held by Bilendi Belgium. A minimum of **80 citizens per country** was required, achieving gender balance, age diversity, income and/educational backgrounds diversity and a diversity of living areas (urban, suburban, rural).

After a **screening of the stories** (quality checks), the minimum number of stories was eventually 65 in Estonia. The maximum number was reached in Germany (297 stories).



Methodology

Who wrote stories

Voices: EU stakeholders



85 stakeholders shared their story

Stakeholders **voluntarily** participated in the study.

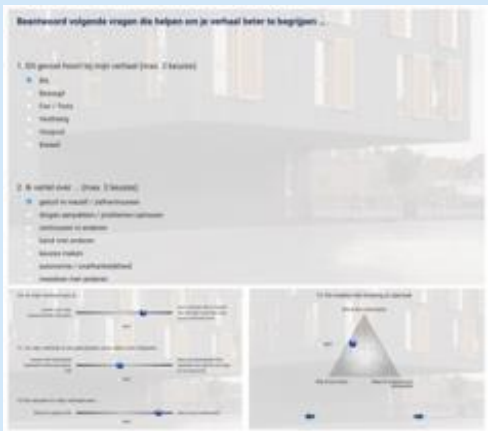
The EU Policy Lab contacted DG ENV, DG AGRI, DG REGIO, DG GROW, DG SANTE, DG CLIMA, DG ENER, DG MARE and DG RTD to disseminate the study to their networks. This was done through **mailing lists, newsletters** or available **online platforms** like the Blue Forum.





Source: Voices that Count

**VOICES
THAT
COUNT**



Source: Voices that Count

Tell us about a very specific moment experience...

Prompting question

Self-interpretation, self-analysing the story

Signifier questions



Patterns, trends, statistics, but also the stories behind the numbers!



Source: Voices that Count

Human sensemaking > Actionable insights



Source: Voices that Count

Methodology

Study design



Prompting question



Think of one moment or experience where you felt very aware of the importance of water in your personal or professional life. Describe that moment and explain why it is important to you. How has it shaped or influenced your perceptions, thinking and/or actions?



English

WATER STORIES

Water is life, and it underpins our economies, societies, and the natural world. Our connections with water can deeply affect our emotions, thoughts, and actions, often in ways that we don't immediately realise.

Whether you are a person working directly or indirectly with water that has a story to tell, or a European citizen for whom this natural element triggers particular thoughts, feelings or experiences - we invite you to share them with us!

Anything goes, as long as it is connected to water. Every story is welcome, and every voice is important as we seek to understand the many different ways in which water touches our lives.

After writing your story, you will be able to explore your own experience through a set of questions. Thousands of stories will be collected across Europe. In this way, we can build a rich understanding of the ways in which Europeans' lives connect to water.

The average time to participate in this narrative survey is 15 to 20 minutes.

Please note that your participation in this narrative survey is entirely voluntary and your involvement is anonymous. We kindly request that you abstain from including any details that may compromise your own or others' identities.

By participating, you give us and researchers associated with us, permission to analyse your story and responses.

Should you have any inquiries prior to, during, or after completion of the narrative survey, please do not hesitate to contact us at jrc-water-experiment@ec.europa.eu.

The prompting question was framed with a behavioural lens, focusing on the awareness of people regarding the importance of water in their life. A subsequent question asked for more details regarding how the story shaped perceptions, thinking and actions (behaviour).

Methodology

Study design



Signifier questions



- Follow-up questions are designed to **help participants explore their own stories without any external bias from the researchers.**
- Primary focus on the **behavioural components** of the narrative, including:
 - Capturing the **emotions** expressed in the story
 - Grasping **hopes** and **fears**
 - Assessing feelings of **individual responsibility**
 - Evaluating the influence of **social norms** versus **personal beliefs**
 - Comparing the importance of current **habits** with **future aspirations**
 - Understanding **how increased awareness can lead to behavioral change.**

Categories of signifier questions

Nature of the stories (incl. personal vs professional story, topic, feelings, hope vs fear, role of water)

Influencing factors (incl. factors shaping perceptions and actions, agency, past/present/future factors, policies/social norms/personal beliefs importance, government/citizens/businesses' influence, water access/quantity/quality aspects)

Impact (incl. economic/social/environmental consequences, whether the story changed how people think and use water)

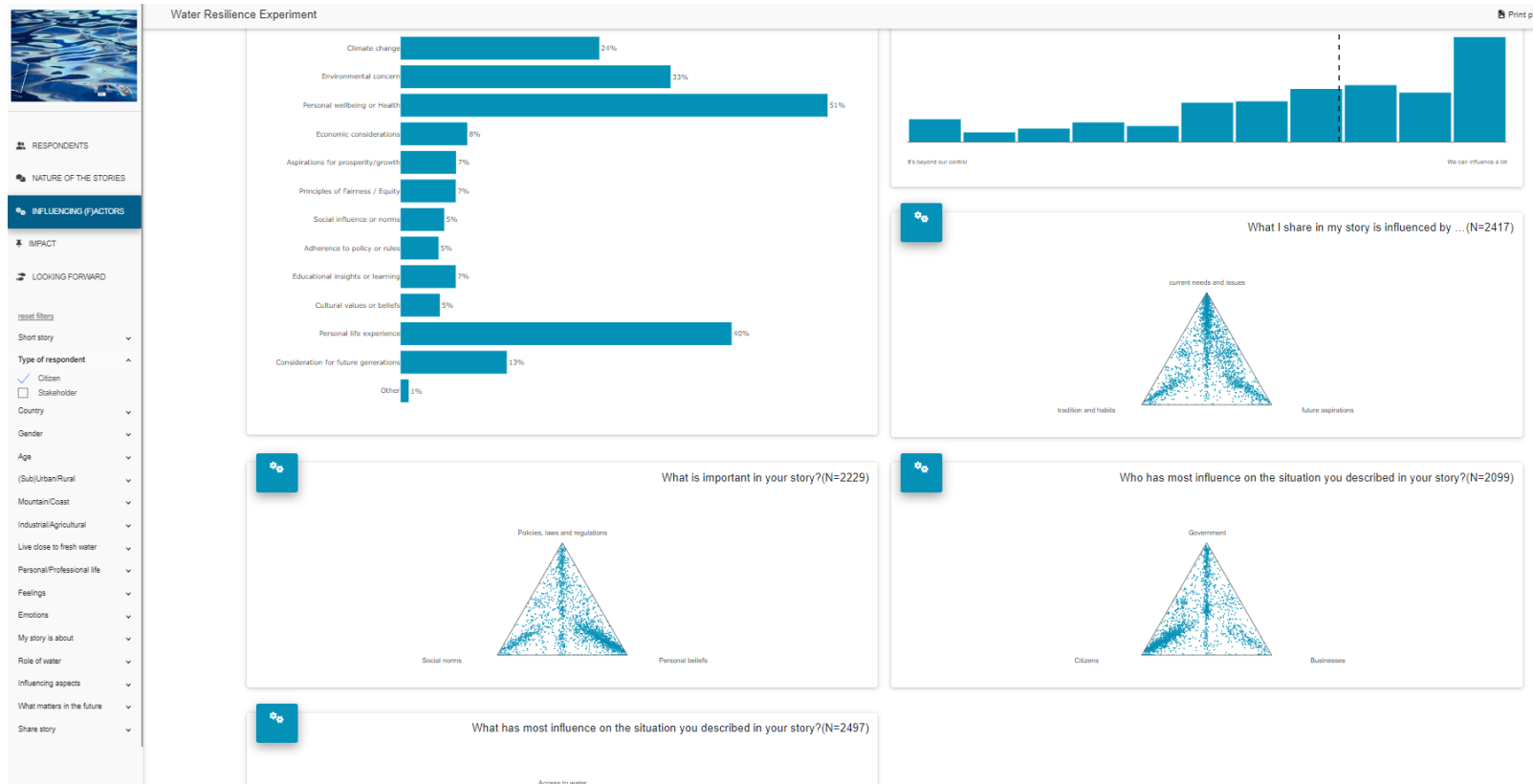
Looking forward (incl. what matters for the sustainable use of water in the future, ideas for the future concerning water and its role and importance in life)

Methodology

Emergent patterns analysis



Interactive Dashboard



All stories and responses are **digitised** using the [SenseMaker software](#), enabling **pattern generation across diverse narratives** and allowing comparisons among specific (sub)groups. This analysis identifies clusters, trends, and outliers, providing **quick insights** into the drivers, behaviors, contextual factors, and actors that shape people's lives. This approach is especially effective for identifying subtle changes in complex situations, drawing from the nuances of personal experiences.

The method ensures that **no voice dominates**; each story carries equal weight in the analysis and visualisations, making it an ideal way to amplify voices that are often unheard.

Methodology

Sensemaking

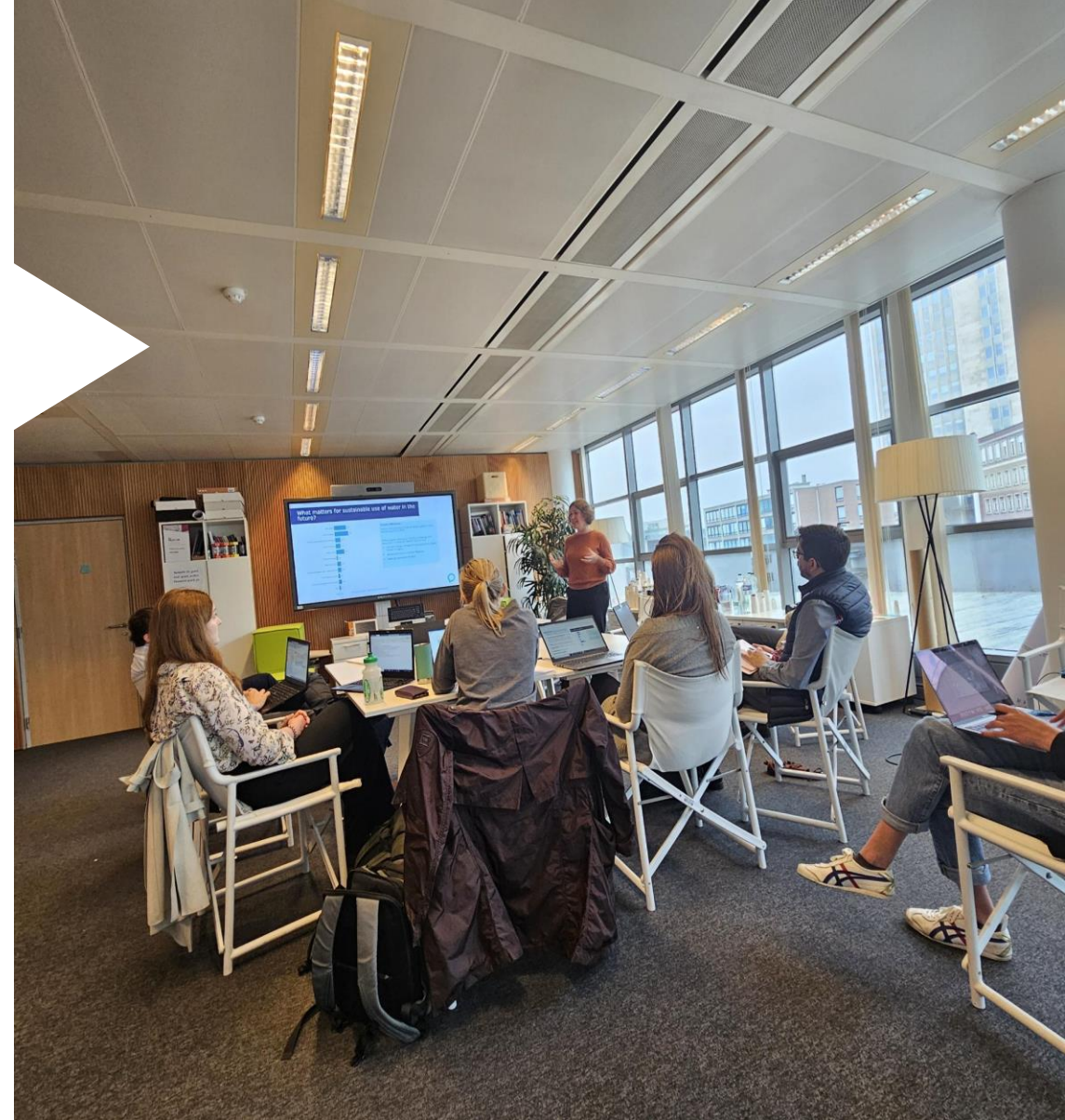


Interpreting stories with policymakers



- The workshop gathered policymakers from DG ENV, DG REGIO, DG HOME and DG MARE.
- **Agenda:** Presentation of emergent patterns, focus on specific issues (packs of stories), group reading sessions with a guiding question, dashboard playing session.

Pack of stories	Guiding question
Stories about housing and living conditions, “support for life” role of water, personal life, current needs	What do these stories say about people's needs? Try to find clusters.
Stories about water as an economic asset	How is the role of water in the economy perceived and understood by people? Try to find clusters.
Stories from rural areas about professional life	How is water used and perceived in professional life in rural areas? Is there anything surprising or unexpected?
Stories that trigger fear but do not change the storyteller's use of water	What are the issues that people fear, related to water? Can you find elements that hint at why people didn't act related to these topics?

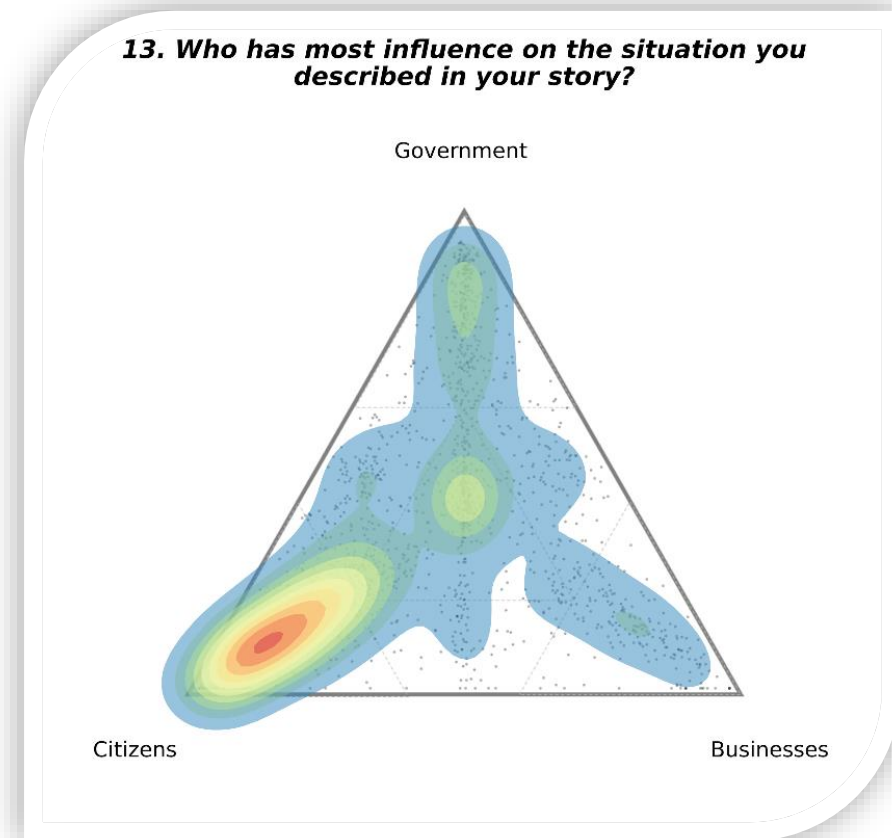


Results

What came up from emergent patterns and the comparative analysis of countries

How to read the triangular heatmap graphs

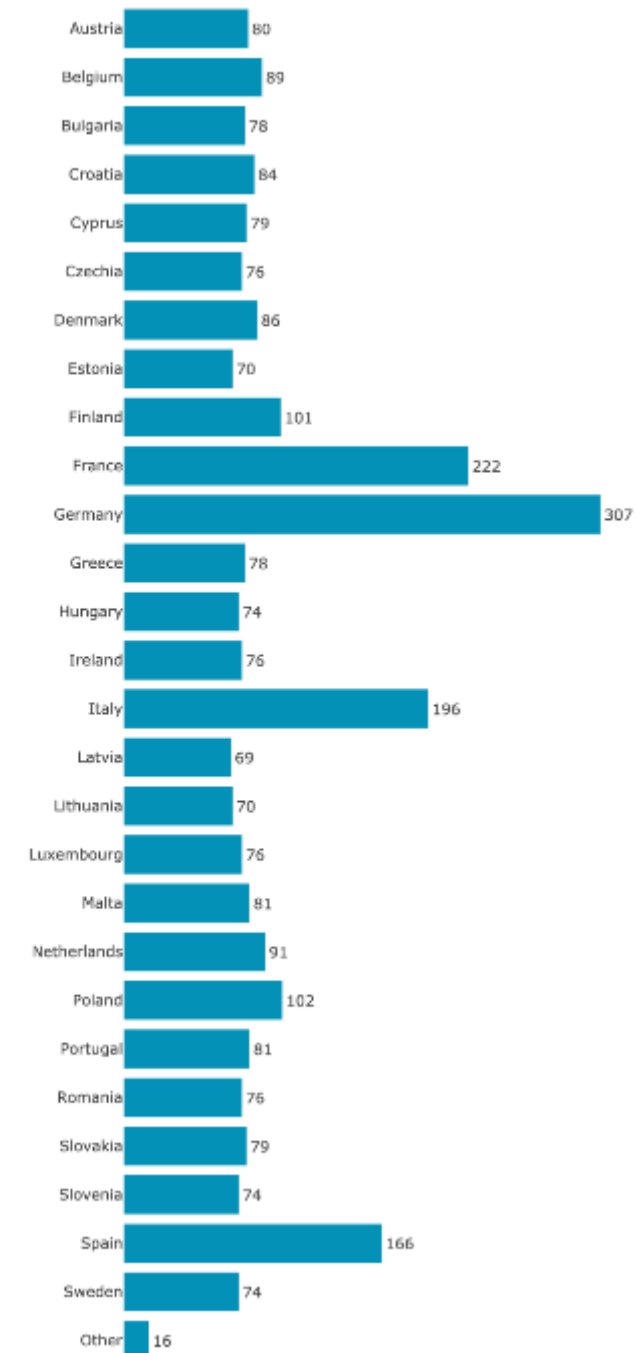
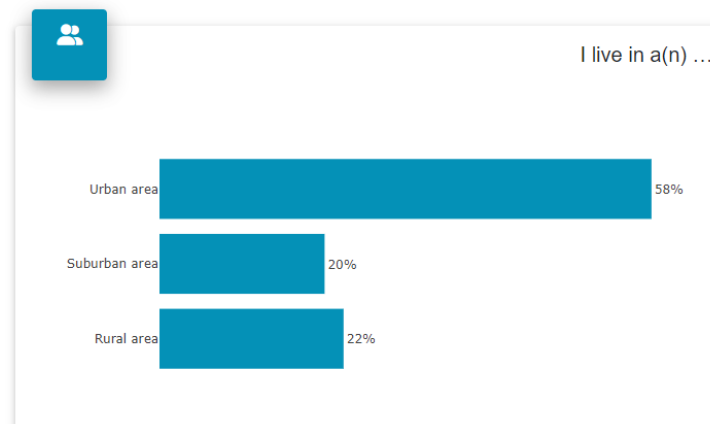
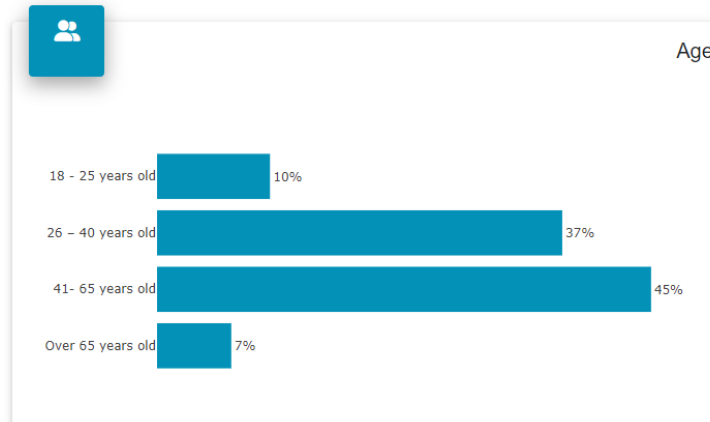
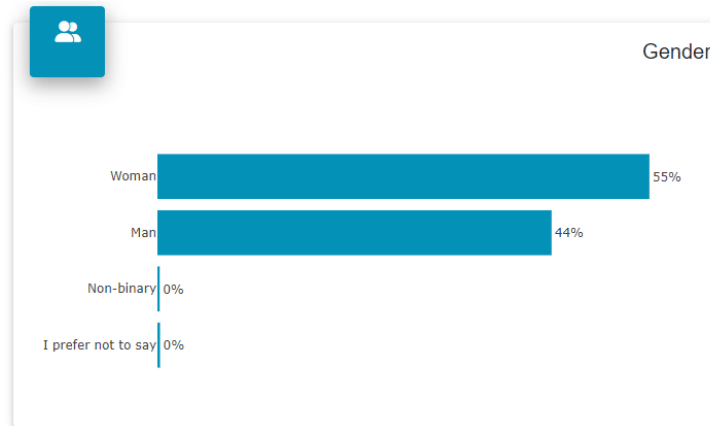
- This triangular graph shows how responses are distributed across three categories in the example to the right: **Government**, **Citizens**, and **Businesses**.
- Each point inside the triangle represents a response, positioned according to its balance between the three categories.
- The **closer a point is to a corner**, the stronger the association with that specific category. For example:
 - Points near the **Government** corner indicate that respondents perceive the government as having the most influence.
 - Points near **Citizens** or **Businesses** reflect a perception of influence by those respective actors.
 - Points near the **center** or along the edges suggest a **shared or balanced influence** between two or three categories.
- The **color heatmap** overlay shows the **density of responses**:
 - **Red areas** indicate a **higher concentration** of responses (i.e., where many respondents gave similar answers).
 - **Blue areas** indicate **fewer responses**.
 - The **colour scale** from higher to lower concentration of data points is as follows: red, orange, yellow, green, blue,
- In the provided example, most responses cluster closer to **Citizens**, suggesting that citizens are seen as the most influential in this scenario.



Results

Demographics

- An average of **70-80 stories per EU Member State** including stakeholder and citizen stories (bar chart to the right)
- Slightly more women than men
- A majority of people aged 26-65 years old
- Most people live in urban areas
- People mostly care equally for themselves, others and the environment. Many people almost only care for themselves (graph below).



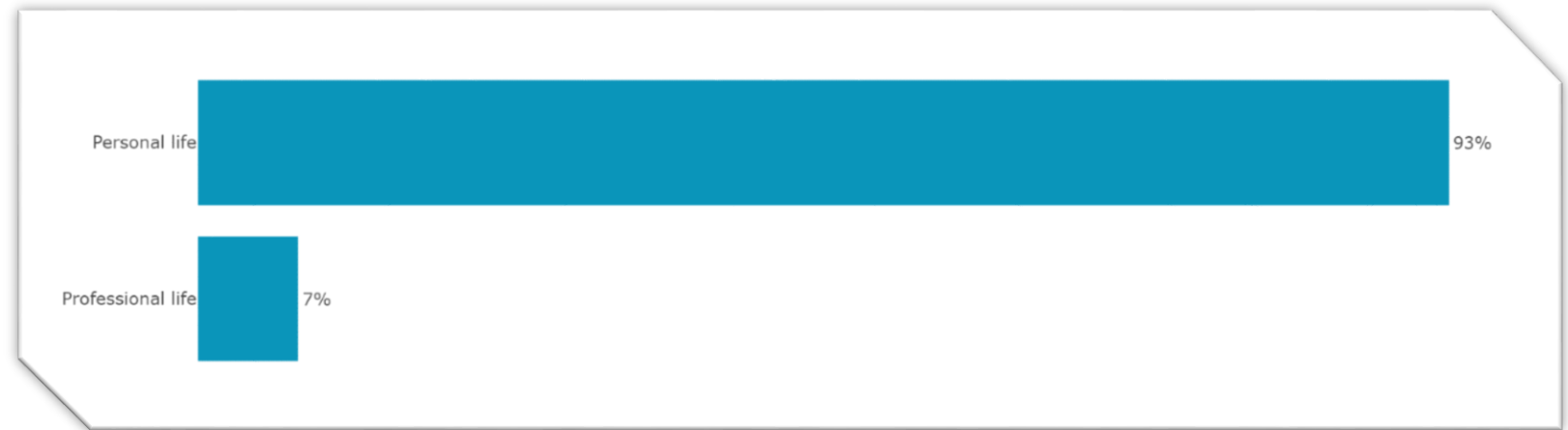
Results

Nature of the stories

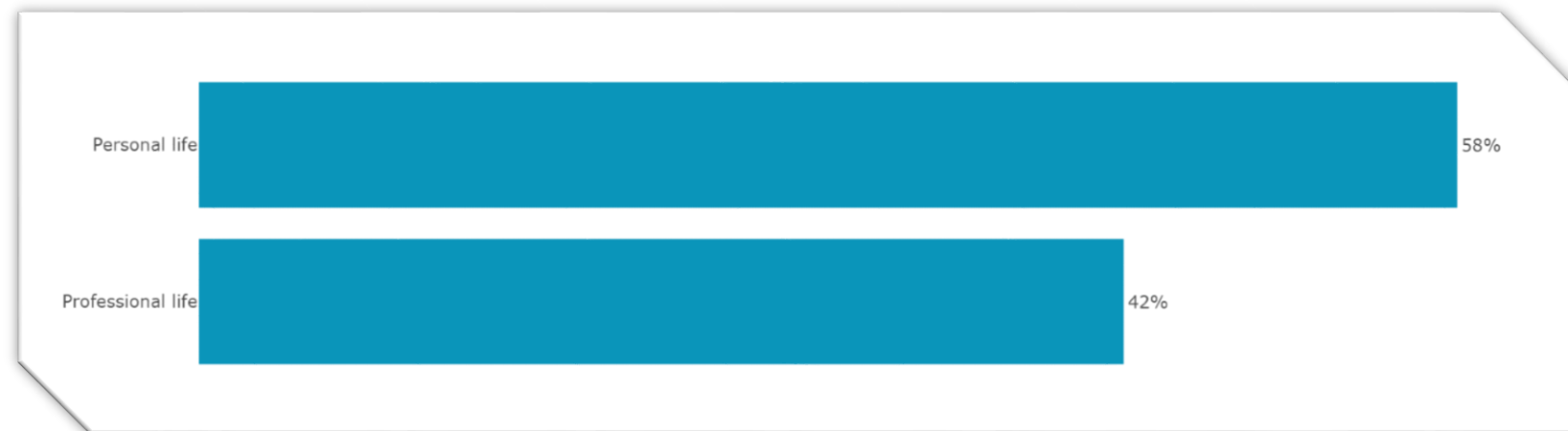
Personal vs professional life

- Citizens mostly talk about their personal life in stories (93%).
- Stakeholders talk more about their professional life (42%) but mention in majority their personal life as well (58%).

Citizens (N=2666)



Stakeholders (N=85)

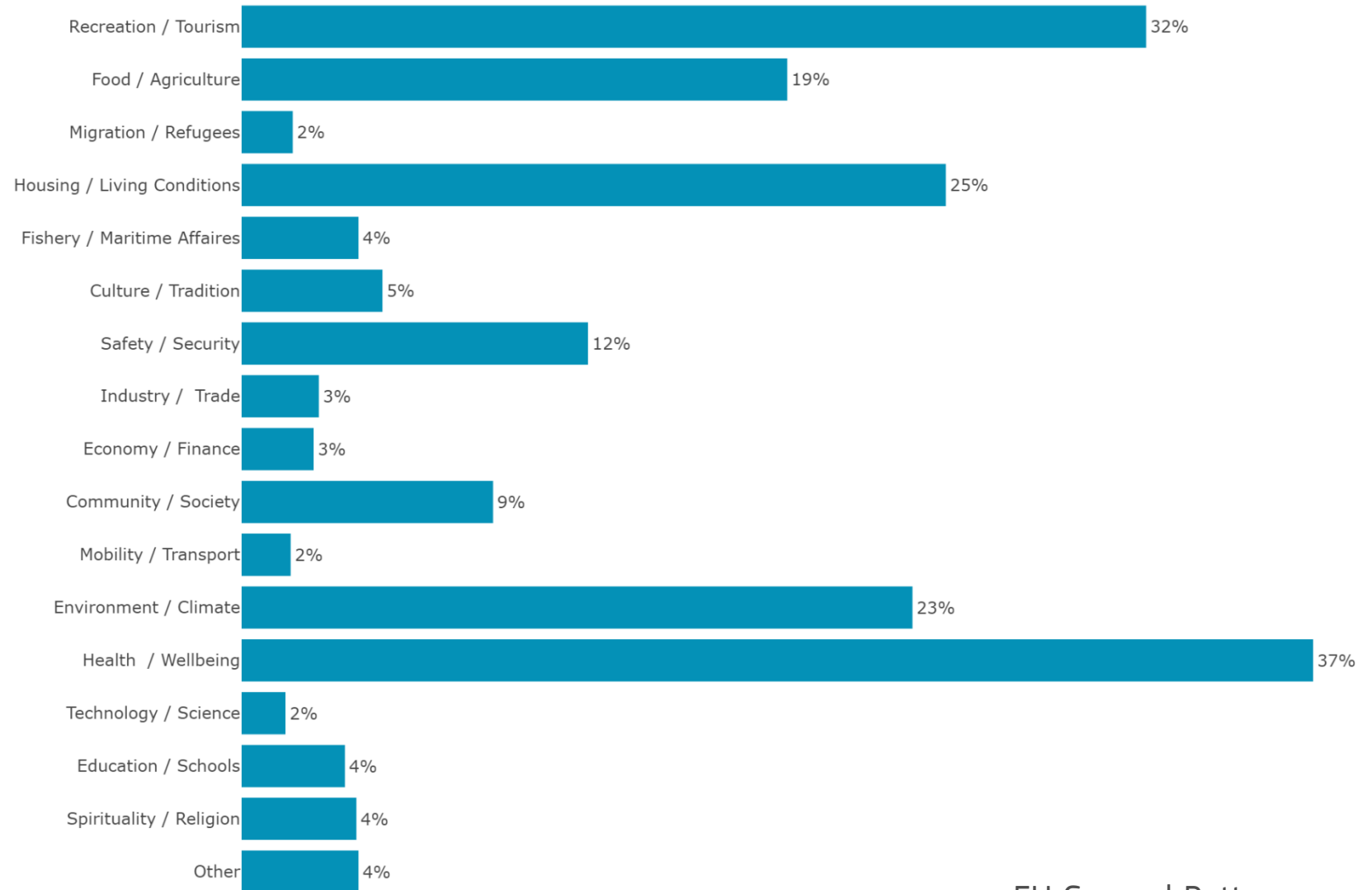


Results

Nature of the stories

My story is about...

- Most stories are about:
 - **Health/wellbeing** (37%),
 - **Recreation/tourism** (32%),
 - **Housing/living conditions** (25%),
 - **Environment/climate** (23%),
 - **Food/agriculture** (19%)
- Stakeholders talk a lot more about Environment/Climate (60%)
- Country differences (top 5)
 - **Safety/Security** in Poland, Cyprus, Ireland, Luxemburg, Estonia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovenia
 - **Fishery/Maritime affairs** in Finland and Luxemburg
 - **Community/Society** in Malta and Croatia.



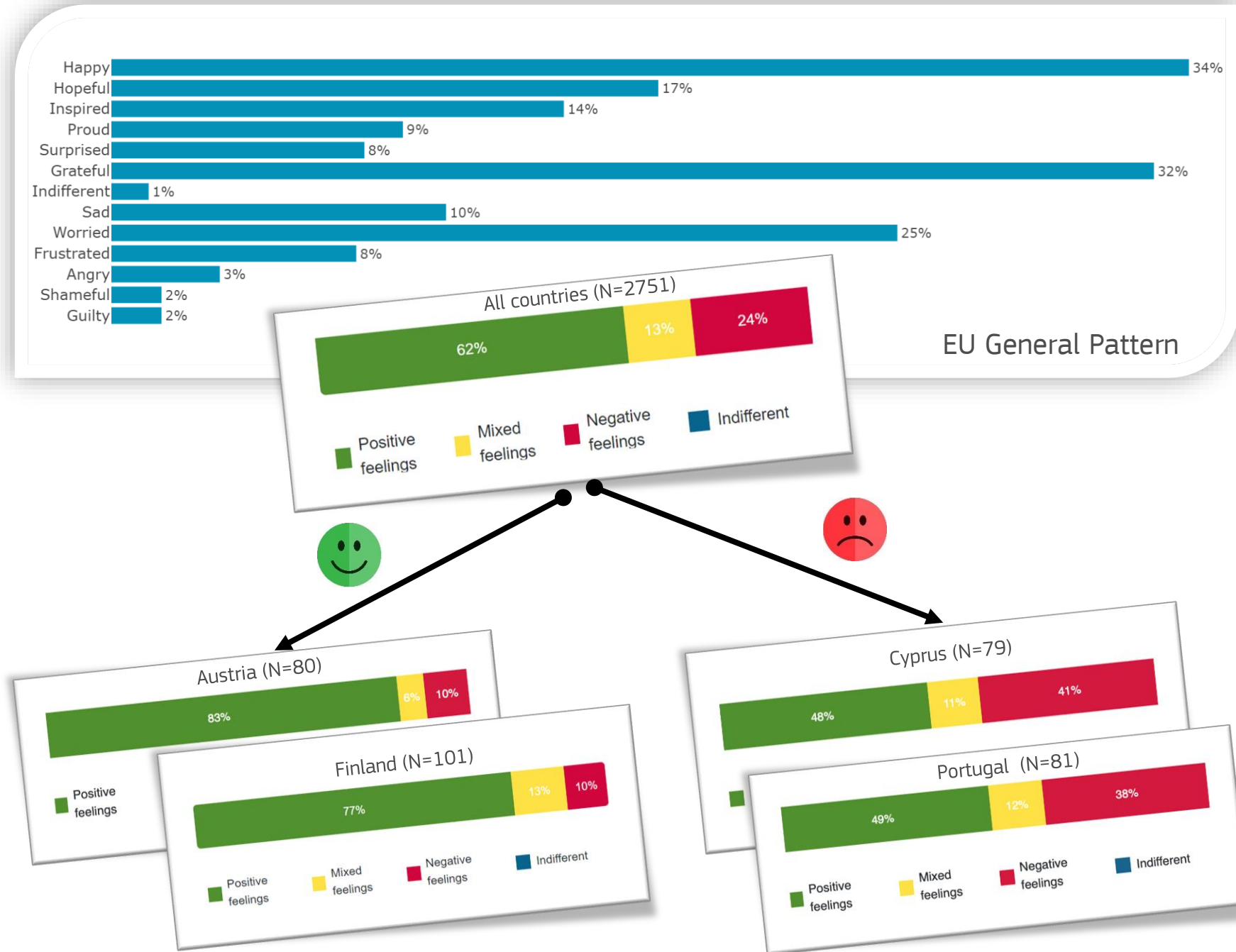
EU General Pattern

Results

Nature of the stories

Feeling in the story...

- Most stories are associated with
 - Happy (34%),
 - Grateful (32%),
 - Worried (25%)
- **Stakeholders are mostly worried** (29%) then grateful (26%) then happy (24%).
- **Country differences**
 - More negative feelings in some Southern countries such as Cyprus and Portugal
 - More positive feelings in some Northern countries such as Austria and Finland



Results

Nature of the stories

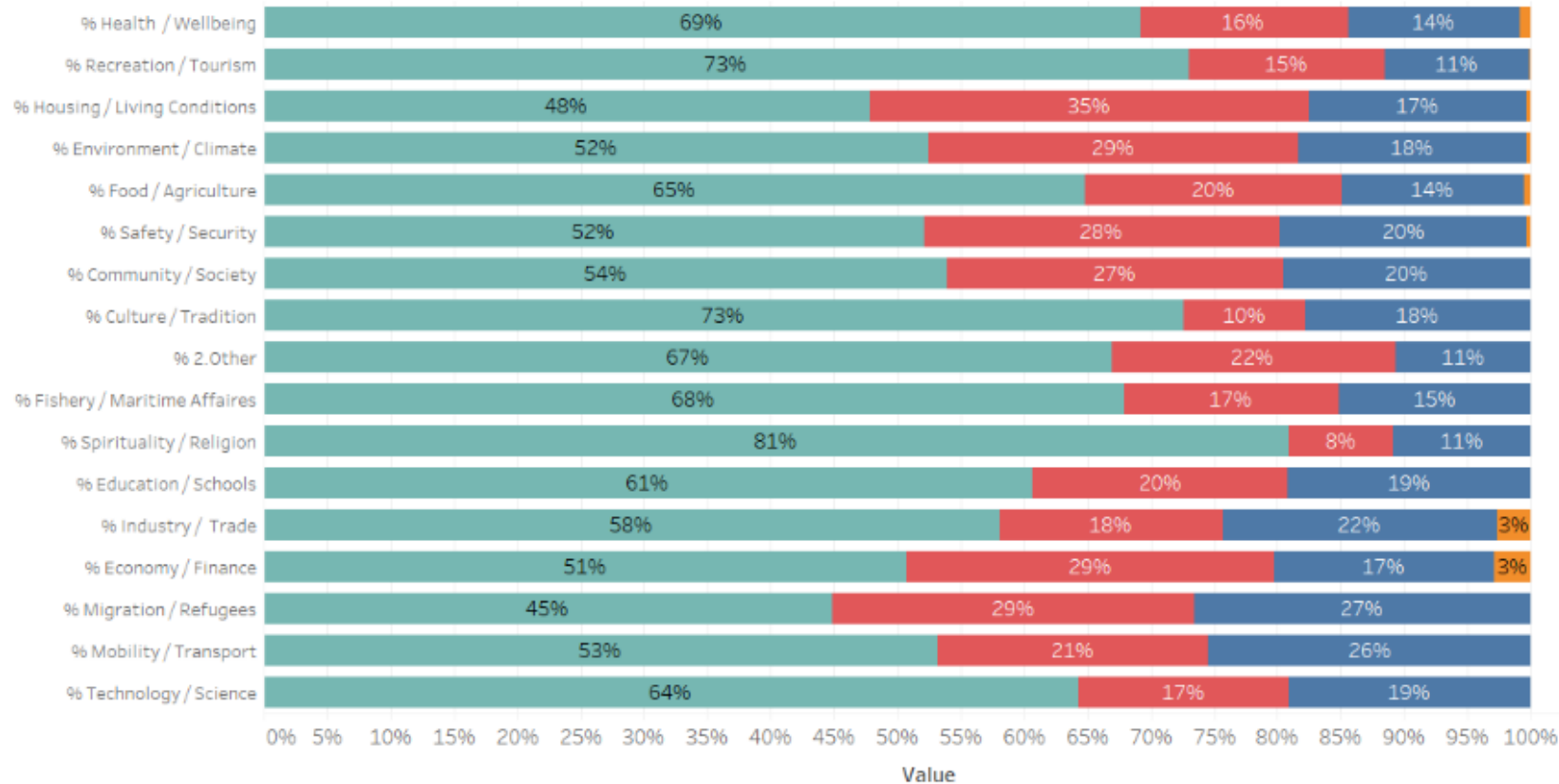
Feelings per topic...

My story is about ...

3. Emotions

- Indifferent
- Mixed feelings
- Negative feelings
- Positive feelings

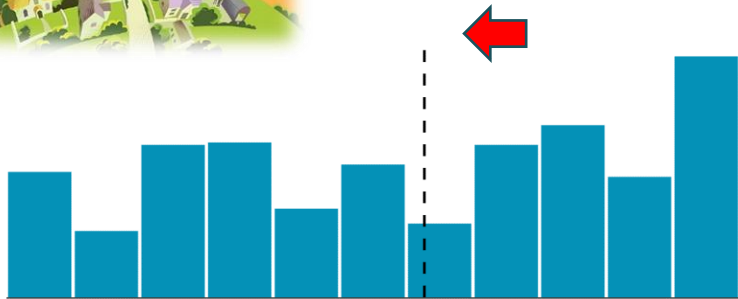
Ranked from highest to lowest number of stories



- Recreation/Tourism, Health/Wellbeing, Culture/Tradition, Spirituality/Religion are mostly associated with positive feelings
- Environment/Climate, Housing and Living conditions, Safety/Security, Economy/Finance and Migration/Refugees are mostly associated with negative feelings

Nature of the stories

- Overall, more stories give hope than fear (graph to the right).
- Some countries are even more hopeful in their stories like **Romania**. Other countries express more fear in their stories like **Malta**.
- There's **more fear in the stories from people living in rural areas.**



Category	Frequency
fear for the future	4
	3
	6
	5
	3
	5
	3
hope for the future	5
	7
	5
	9

A bar chart with 10 bars representing different response categories. The first four bars are grouped under the label 'fear for the future' and the last four bars are grouped under 'hope for the future'. A vertical dashed line separates the two groups. A red arrow points to the fifth bar, which is the first bar in the 'hope for the future' group. The heights of the bars vary, with the third bar in the 'fear' group being the tallest and the fifth bar in the 'hope' group being the shortest.

Category	Bar 1	Bar 2	Bar 3	Bar 4	Bar 5	Bar 6	Bar 7	Bar 8	Bar 9
fear for the future	Medium	Medium	Very High	Medium-High	Medium				
hope for the future	Low	Low	Medium	Medium-High	High				

A bar chart illustrating the distribution of fear and hope for the future. The x-axis is labeled 'fear for the future' on the left and 'hope for the future' on the right. A vertical dashed line separates the two. A green arrow points from the 'fear' side towards the 'hope' side. The bars show a general increase in height from left to right, with a significant peak on the far right.

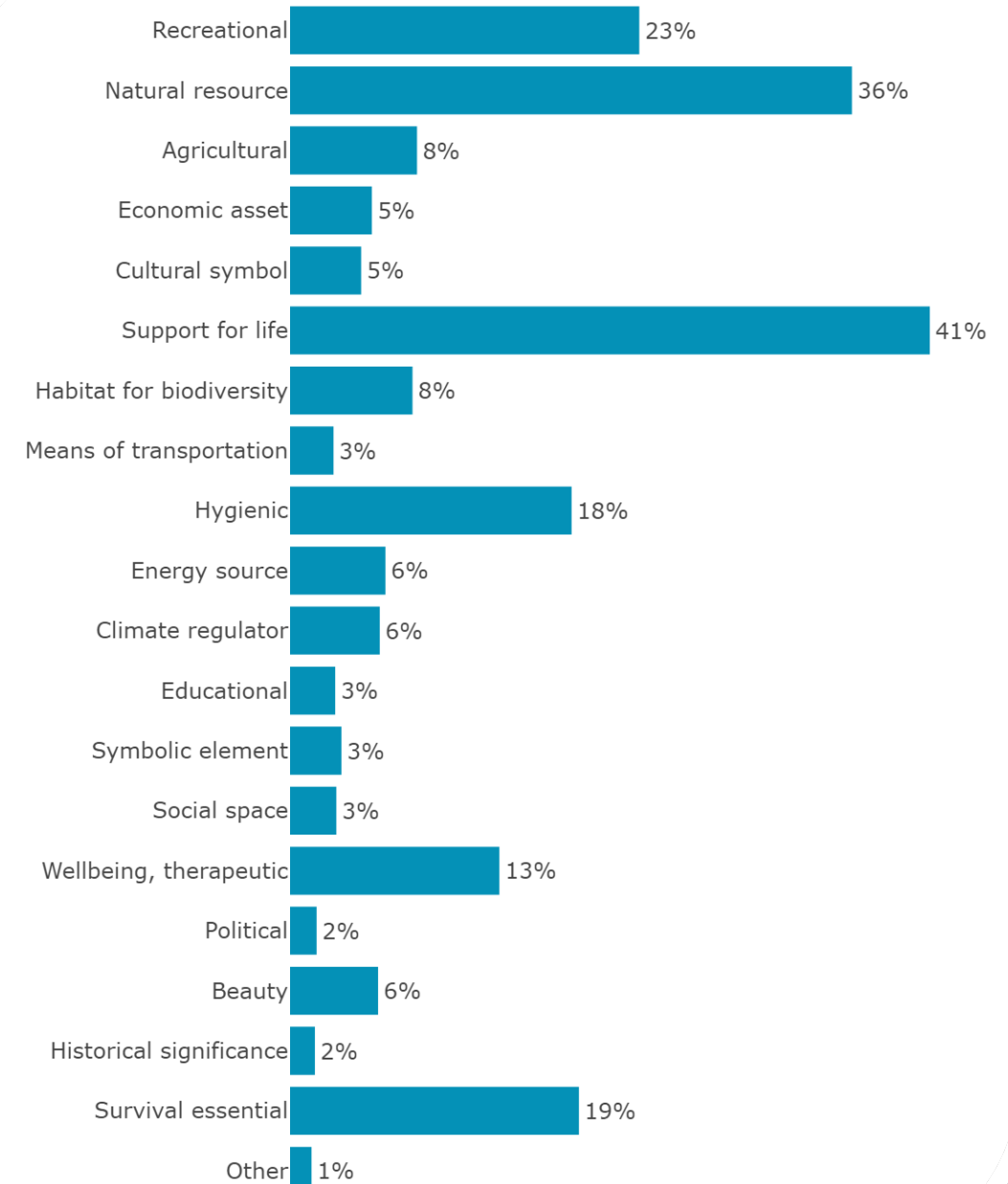
Results

Nature of the stories

The role of water in my story is...

- The roles of water in the stories most frequently mentioned by the storytellers are :

 - 1. Support for life** (41%),
 - 2. Natural resource** (36%),
 - 3. Recreational** (23%),
 - 4. Survival essential** (19%),
 - 5. Hygienic** (18%)
 - 6. Wellbeing, therapeutic** (13%)
- In the top 6 of other countries, we find:
 - Agricultural (France, Spain, Czechia, Hungary)
 - Habitat for biodiversity (Germany, Spain, Luxemburg, Hungary)
 - Energy source (Austria, Poland, Bulgaria, Latvia)
 - Climate regulator (Slovenia)
 - Economic asset (Luxemburg)
 - Cultural symbol (Luxemburg)
 - Educational (Romania)
- For **stakeholders**, water is mostly seen as a natural resource (49%) then support for life (39%) then Habitat for biodiversity (22%).

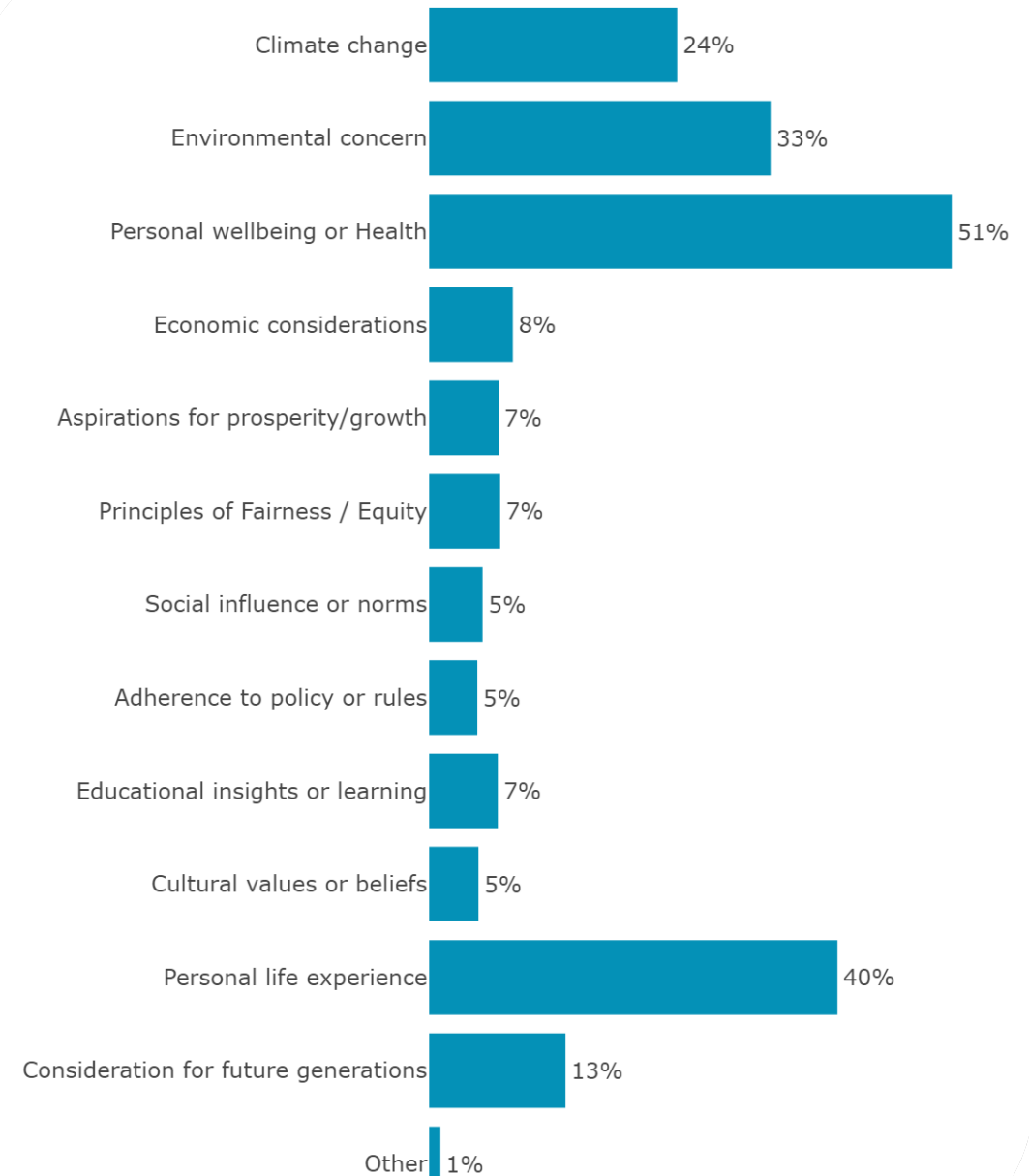
EU General Pattern

Results

Influencing (f)actors / motives / values / drivers

Story aspects shaping perceptions/actions...

- The aspects that most prominently shaped the perceptions, thinking and/or actions of the storyteller are :
 - 1. Personal wellbeing or health** (51%),
 - 2. Personal life experience** (40%)
 - 3. Environmental concern** (33%),
 - 4. Climate change** (24%)
 - 5. Consideration for future generations** (13%)
- Other influential aspects that enter the top 5 in the stories of some countries, are:
 - Economic considerations (France, Italy, Malta)
 - Aspirations for prosperity/growth (Bulgaria, Luxemburg, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland)
 - Educational insights or learning (Ireland, Poland)
 - Social influence or norm (Estonia)
 - Cultural values or beliefs (Estonia)
 - Adherence to policy or rules (Slovakia)



EU General Pattern

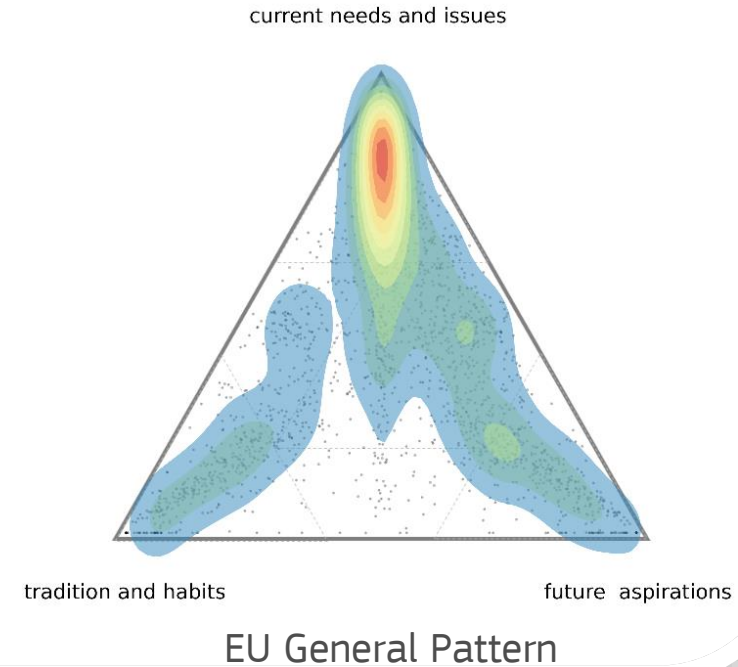
Results

Influencing (f)actors / motives / values / drivers

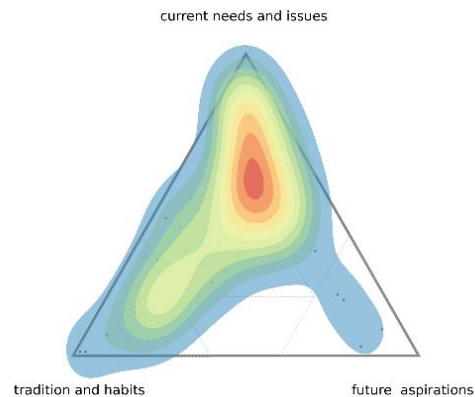
What is important in my story...

- Overall, there's a **focus on current needs and issues** in the stories
- Some countries stand out by their stories' focus on future aspirations such as Hungary and Austria.
- Other countries stand out by their stories' focus on traditions and habits like Finland.

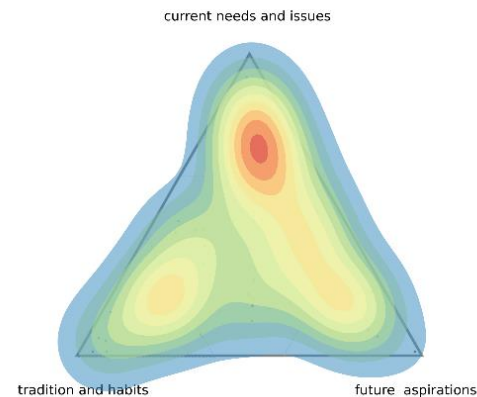
11. What I share in my story is influenced by ...



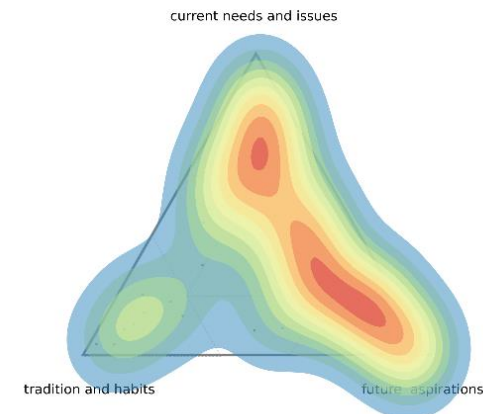
Netherlands



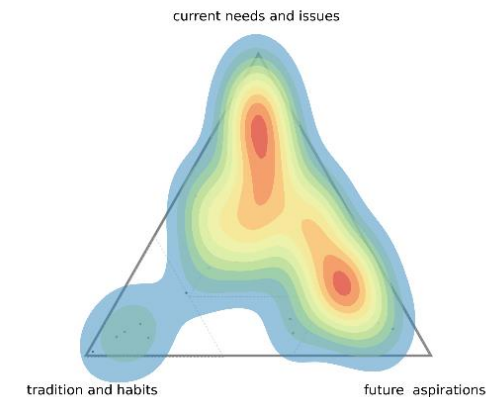
Finland



Hungary



Austria



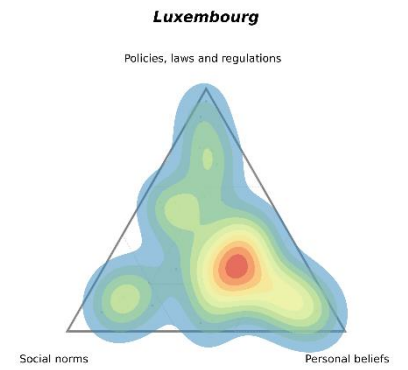
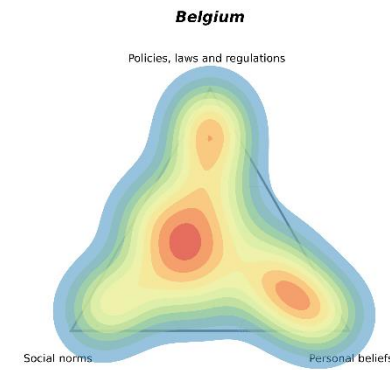
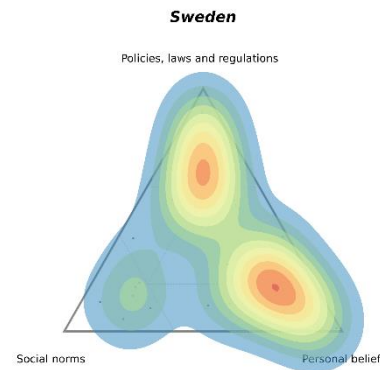
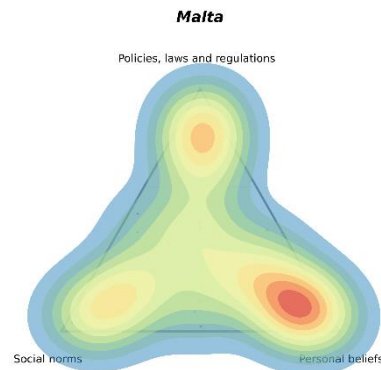
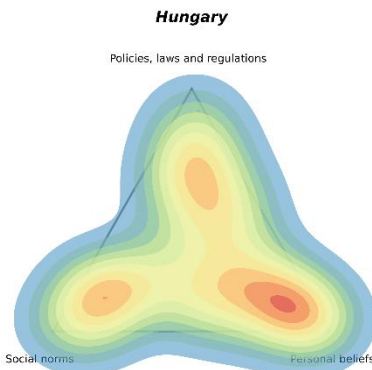
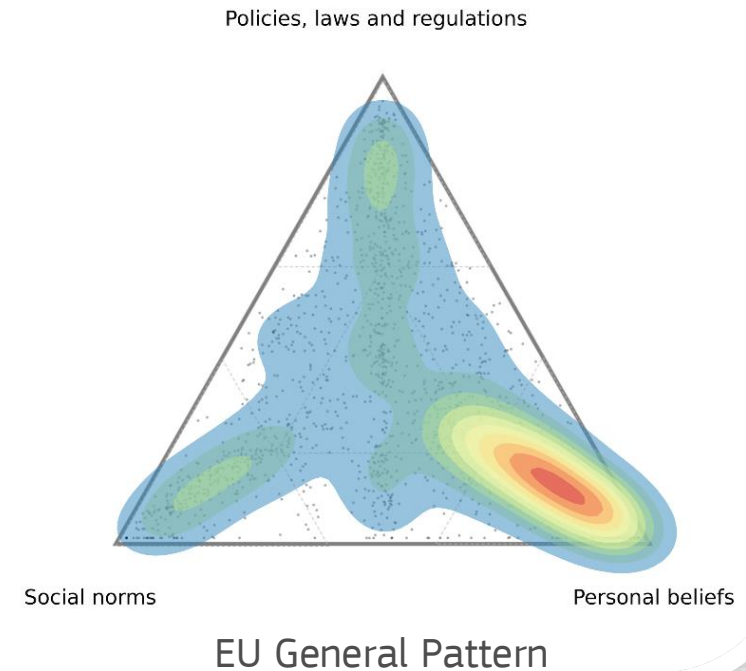
Results

Influencing (f)actors / motives / values / drivers

What is important in my story...

- Most stories involve **personal beliefs**.
- In some countries (Hungary, Malta), stories are much more heterogeneous, some highlighting the role of policies, others the role of social norms and others the role of personal beliefs.
- In other countries (Sweden), stories involve policies or personal beliefs.
- In other countries (Belgium, Luxembourg), the importance of policies, social norms and personal beliefs is more balanced, all three factors being important to shape perceptions and actions.

12. What is important in your story?



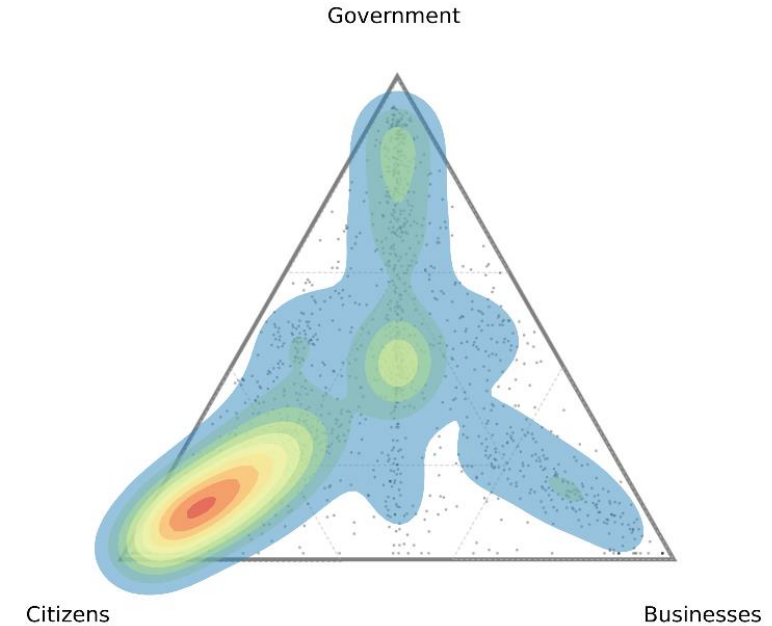
Results

Influencing (f)actors / motives / values / drivers

Who has influence in my story...

- In the stories overall, **citizens** are the ones with more influence on the situations described.
- In stories from Malta, Denmark, Slovenia, Cyprus, Italy, Sweden and Ireland, **governments** have much more influence on the situation. It particularly concerns the case for stories about professional life, stories about migration/refugees and technology/science.
- In stories from the Netherlands, Belgium, Romania and Austria, stories describe situations in which **governments, citizens and business** have influence altogether. It particularly relates to stories about economy/finance
- In stories from Romania, **businesses** have much more influence while in Austria, no story involves businesses exclusively. It most often relates to stories about trade/industry.

13. Who has most influence on the situation you described in your story?



EU General Pattern

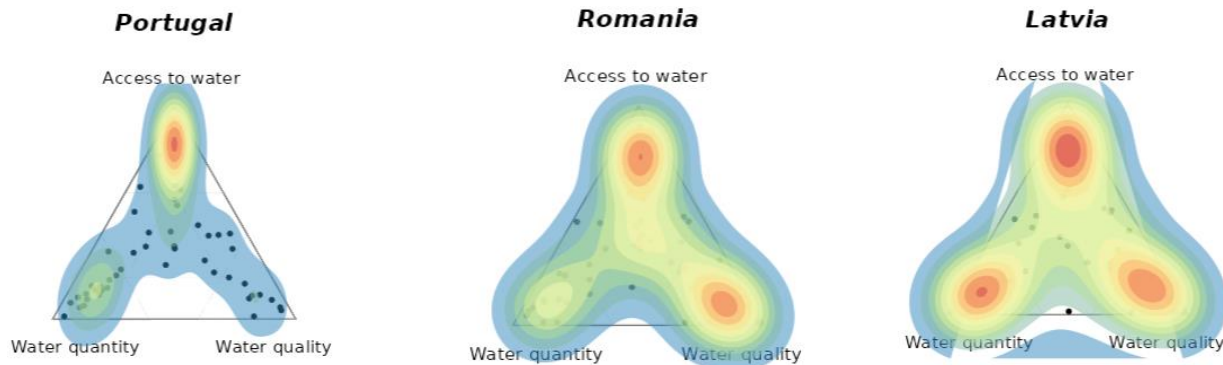


Results

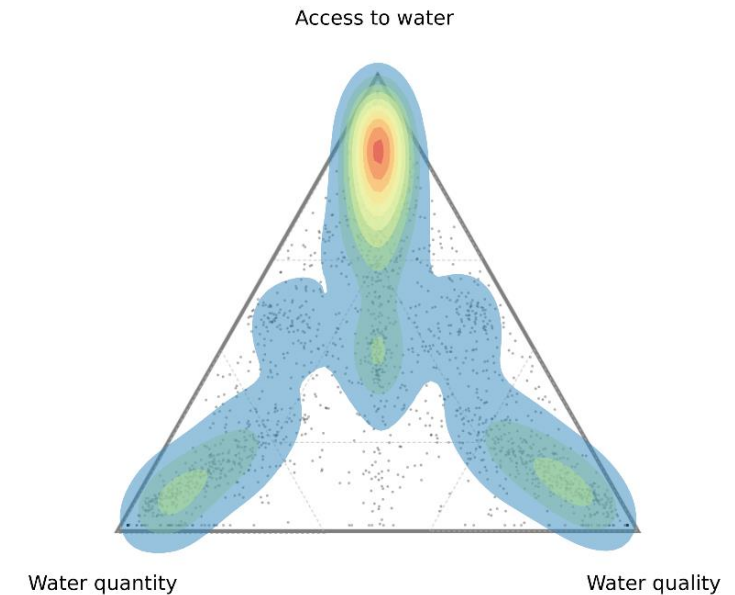
Influencing (f)actors / motives / values / drivers

What has most influence in my story...

- **Access to water** is predominant in most stories.
- It is enhanced in stories from Malta, Portugal, Croatia, Estonia and Ireland.
- Water quality is predominant in stories from Romania, Finland, Lithuania and Latvia.
- Water quantity is important in stories from Portugal, Latvia and Lithuania.



14. What has most influence on the situation you described in your story?



EU General Pattern

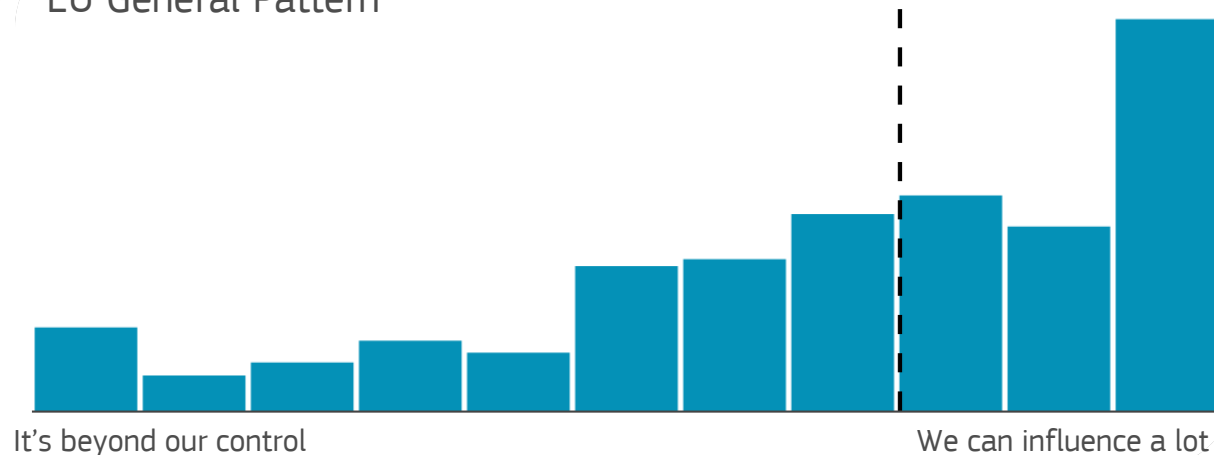
Results

Influencing (f)actors / motives / values / drivers

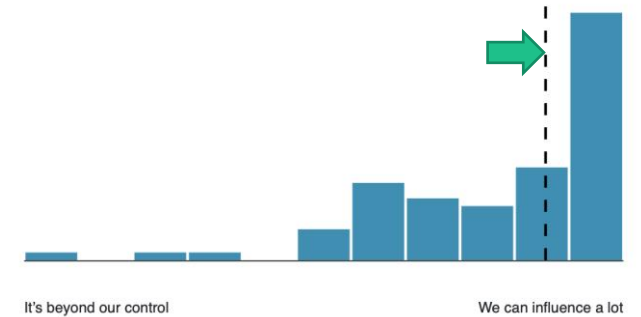
How much people influence the situation...

- Most storytellers feel that people like themselves can influence the situation described in their story (graph below).
- It is enhanced in countries like Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia.
- There's less feeling of control on the situation in countries like Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands

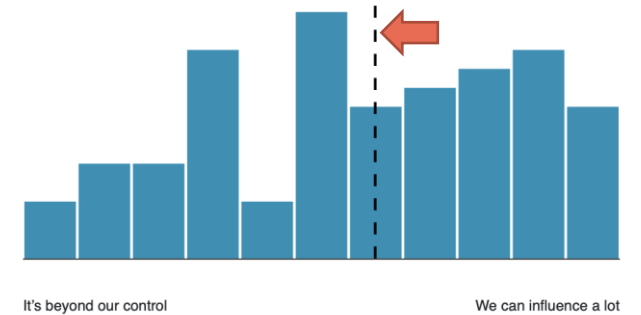
EU General Pattern



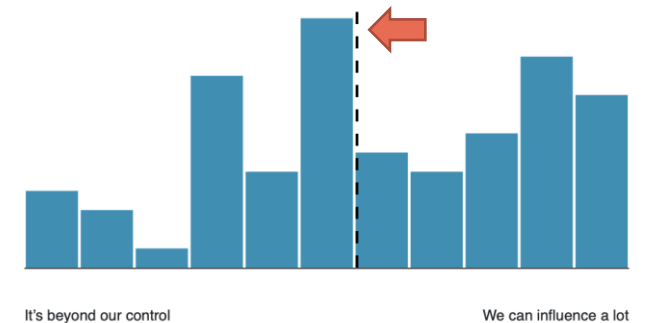
Romania



Denmark



Sweden



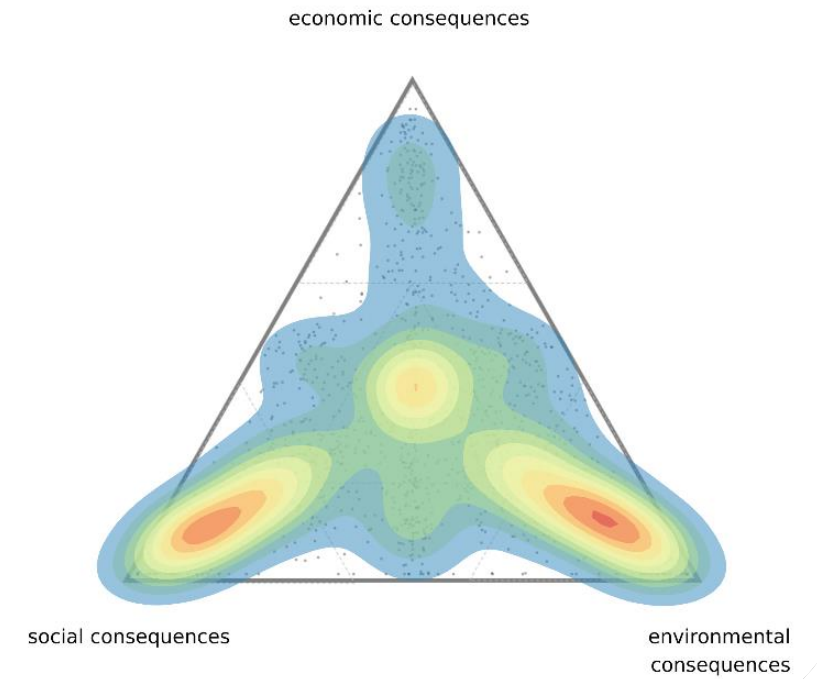
Results

Impact

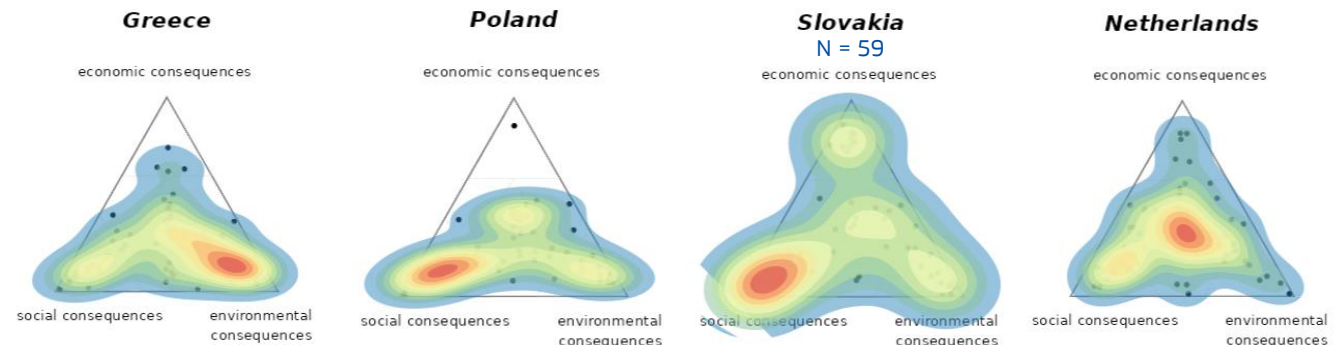
Type of consequences in my story...

- Two strong patterns emerge: either stories **predominantly with social consequences** or stories **predominantly with environmental consequences**. A slighter pattern also stands out as having a balance of economic, social and environmental consequences in the stories.
- In stories from Czechia, Greece, France and Hungary, a stronger pattern emerges for predominantly environmental consequences.
- In stories from Ireland, Poland, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Lithuania, a stronger pattern emerges for predominantly social consequences.
- In stories from Slovakia and Bulgaria, economic consequences stand out more.
- A balance between all three types of consequences is found more prominent in Luxemburg, Poland and the Netherlands.

15. What I describe in my story has ...



EU General Pattern



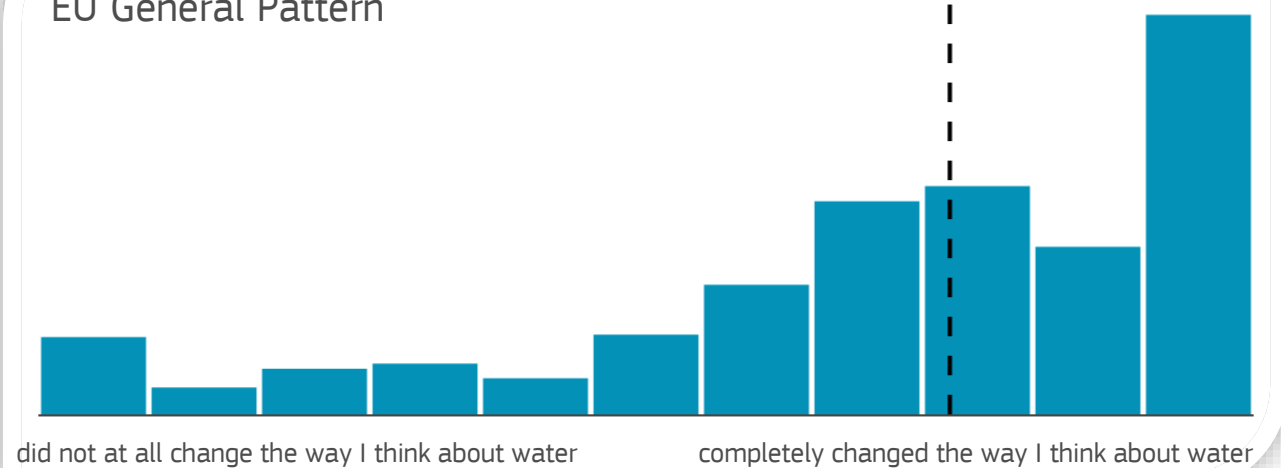
Results

Impact

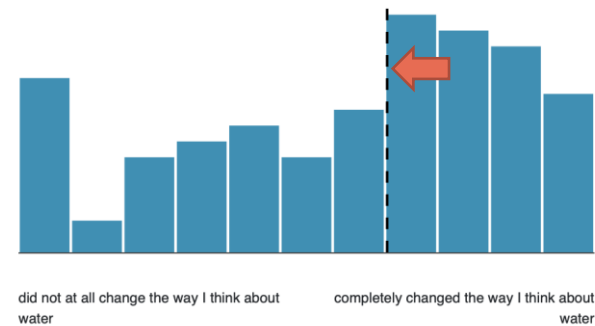
My story changed my thinking about water...

- Most stories changed to a good extent the storytellers' use of water
- It is much less the case in stories from the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark and Finland.
- It is slightly more the case in Bulgaria and Lithuania.

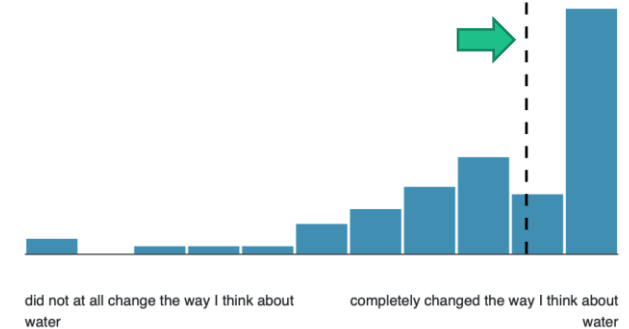
EU General Pattern



Finland



Bulgaria



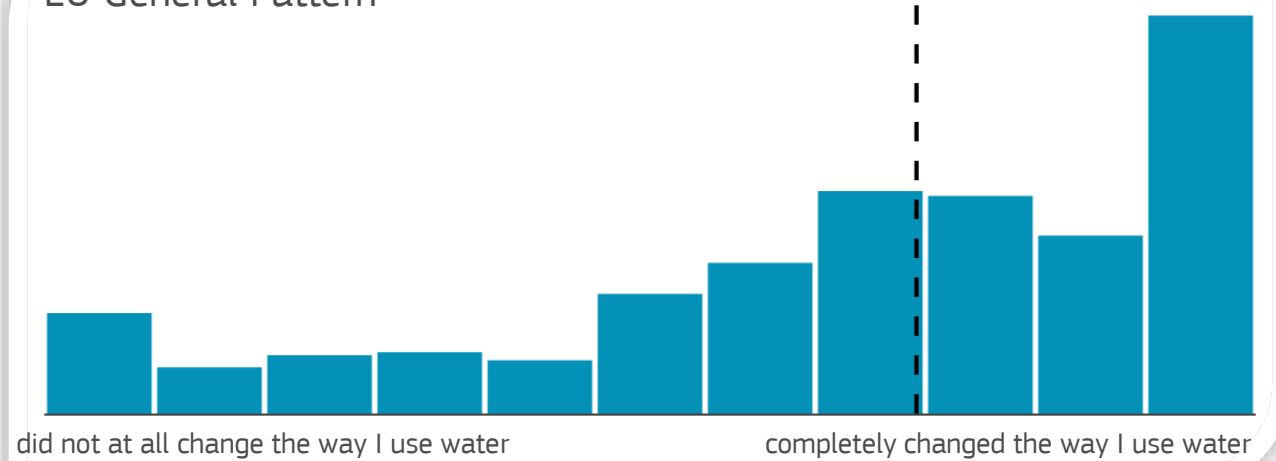
Results

Impact

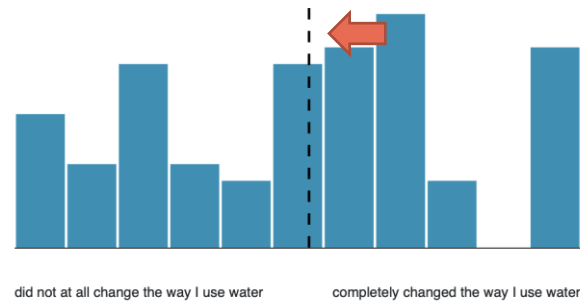
My story changed my use of water...

- Most stories changed to a good extent the storytellers' use of water
- It is much less the case in stories from the Germany, Sweden, Denmark and Finland.
- It is slightly more the case in stories from Bulgaria.

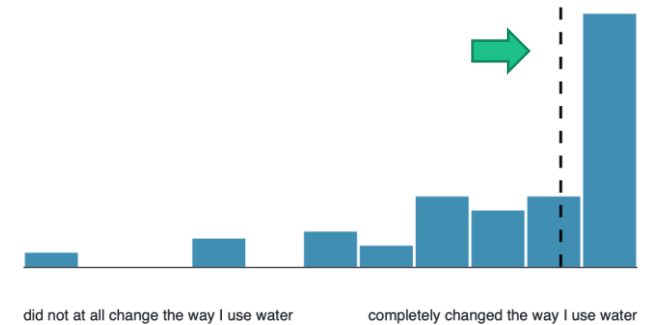
EU General Pattern



Denmark



Bulgaria

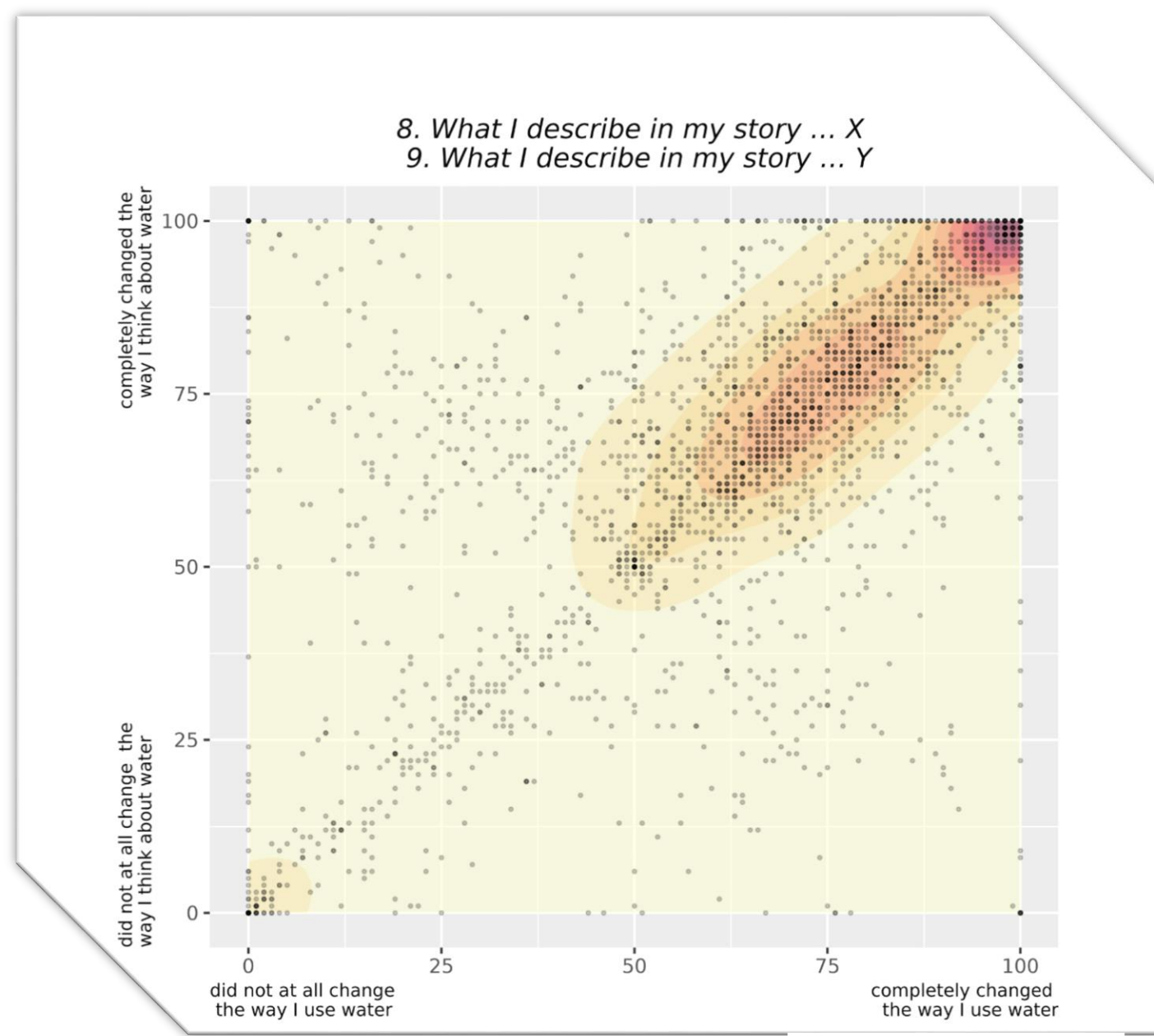


Results

Impact

Changing thinking vs use of water...

- Most storytellers indicate that what they described in their story changed the way they think about water and changed the way they use water.
- There are a few storytellers who neither changed their think not their use of water after the experience they describe (bottom left corner).
- There are a few storytellers who changed their way of thinking about water but didn't change their use of water (top left corner), suggesting an intention-action gap.



Results

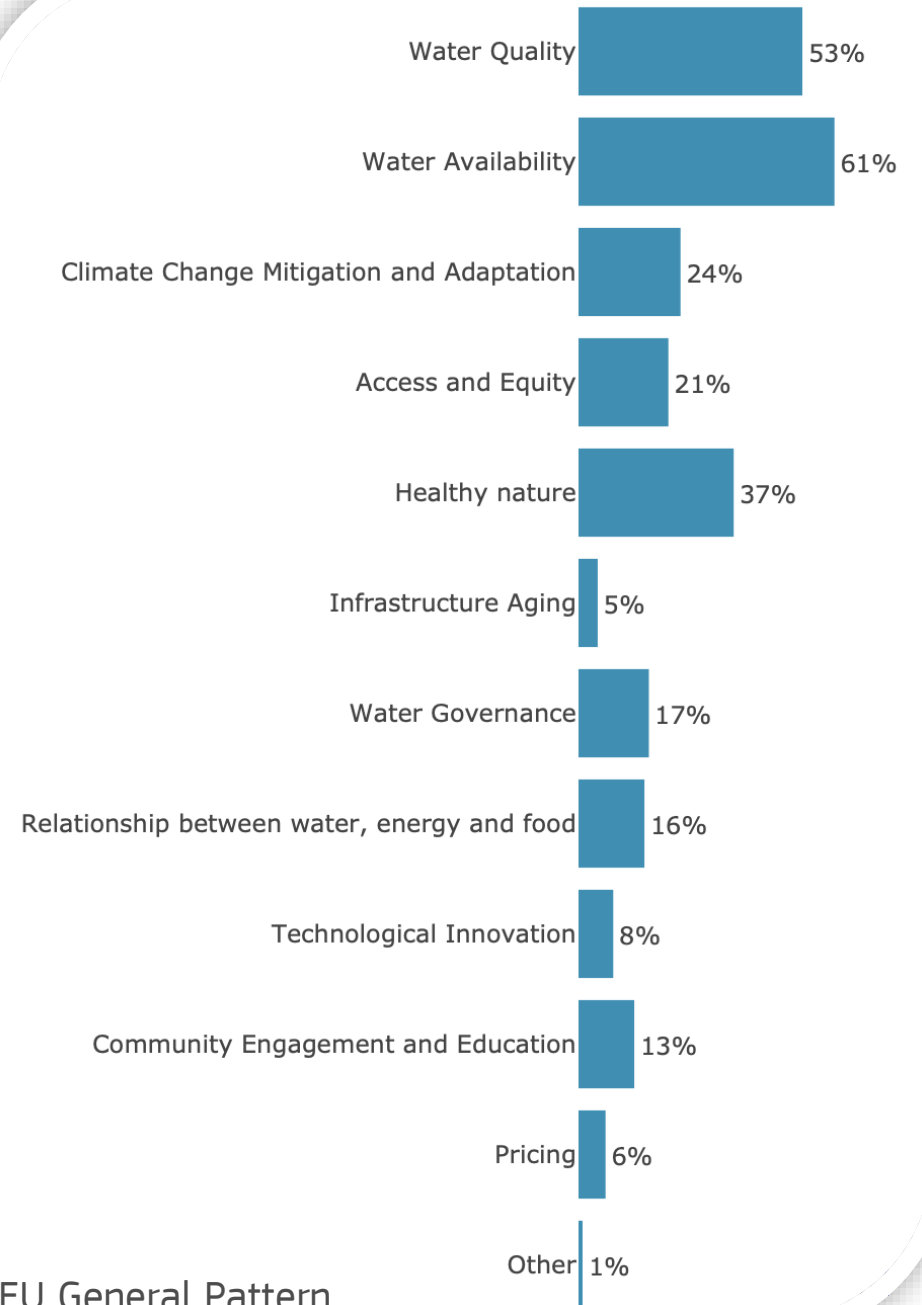
Looking forward



This is the only question in the study that does not relate to the story. This is the only general question that can be interpreted as an opinion.

What matters for sustainable use of water...

- What matters most for sustainable use of water in the future is :
↓
 1. **Water availability** (61%),
 2. **Water quality** (53%)
 3. **Healthy nature** (37%)
- Other aspects that enter the top 3 of being most important are:
 - Climate change, mitigation and adaptation (Spain, Malta, Hungary)
 - Access and equity (France, Belgium)
 - Water governance (Poland)
 - Community engagement and education (Italy)
- Some matters stand out in a few countries:
 - Technological innovation (Estonia, Sweden, Belgium)
 - Pricing (Belgium, Malta)
 - Infrastructure aging (Ireland)
 - Community engagement and education (Portugal)
 - Relationship between water, energy and food (Romania, The Netherlands)
 - Water governance (The Netherlands, Croatia)
 - Access and equity (Luxemburg)



Results

Looking forward

Ideas for the future...

Conservation and Efficient Use

1. **Installing water recovery systems in homes and buildings:** "Install water recovery systems in all homes, do away with bathtubs, tax on swimming pools/jacuzzis/spas, intervention in schools."
2. **Promoting the use of water-saving devices and technologies:** "Abolish bathtubs in homes and allow hotel guests to choose a room with a shower; facilitate access to public showers and make them free of charge; make community swimming pools attractive to combat the construction of private pools; ban the sale of configurable jacuzzis; distribute water recovery devices free of charge; introduce wastewater systems for flushing toilets."
3. **Encouraging reduced water consumption and the reuse of greywater:** "Create creative workshops with children showing the evolution of nature with sufficient water and compare with a situation with less water, or even no water. Visualizing will make it easier for them to understand what's at stake, and they are tomorrow's leaders who will be able to think differently. Add to this the creation of water recovery and treatment systems with tax benefits to encourage companies to take care of our blue 'gold'."

Awareness and Education

1. **Actions to raise awareness about water use and conservation:** "Utilize social media campaigns to spread awareness about water conservation. These platforms can reach a wider audience and encourage proactive behavior."
2. **Addressing cultural change towards water conservation from an early age:** "Encourage schools to implement water-saving measures, such as installing low-flow fixtures and promoting water conservation projects among students."
3. **Educational campaigns to inform the public about the importance of water:** "Develop multimedia campaigns that highlight the journey of water from source to tap. These campaigns can educate people about the complex processes involved in making water safe for consumption."

Results

Looking forward

Ideas for the future...

Policy and Regulation

- 1. Implementing stricter regulations on water pollution and industrial discharge:** *"Enforce strict penalties for companies that violate water pollution standards. Regular inspections and monitoring can ensure compliance."*
- 2. Incentivizing businesses and households to adopt water-saving practices:** *"Community Empowerment: Empowering local communities to participate in water management decisions and initiatives, fostering ownership and stewardship. Incentives like tax rebates for installing water-saving devices can encourage adoption."*
- 3. Promoting the political will to implement well-researched solutions:** *"Organize forums and conferences to bring together scientists, policymakers, and the public. These events can facilitate discussions on implementing sustainable water management solutions."*

Innovation and Technology

- 1. Developing and promoting new technologies for water purification and desalination:** *"Invest in sustainable technologies for water management and educate people about the importance of preserving this vital resource. Technologies like membrane filtration and reverse osmosis can improve water quality."*
- 2. Supporting research into sustainable water management practices:** *"Encourage universities and research institutions to focus on water sustainability. Grants and funding can support innovative research projects."*
- 3. Encouraging the adoption of smart water management systems:** *"Implement sensors and data analytics to monitor water distribution networks. These systems can detect leaks and inefficiencies in real-time"*

Results

Looking forward

Ideas for the future...

Community and Cultural Initiatives

1. **Promoting community-led water conservation projects:** " Organize community events to raise awareness about water conservation. Activities like tree planting and clean-up drives can engage people and promote environmental stewardship."
2. **Encouraging the celebration of water-related cultural traditions:** "Incorporate water conservation messages into cultural festivals and celebrations. This can increase public awareness and promote sustainable practices."
3. **Supporting indigenous practices and knowledge in water management:** "Recognize and integrate traditional water management techniques into modern practices. Indigenous knowledge can offer sustainable solutions that have been tested over centuries."

Infrastructure and Investment

1. **Investing in infrastructure to prevent water leakage and improve distribution:** "Better infrastructure on water systems and water quality. Important focus on people with no water access. Upgrading pipelines and fixing leaks can significantly reduce water loss "
2. **Developing urban planning initiatives that incorporate sustainable water management:** "Upgrade water infrastructure, promote water conservation, implement integrated water management, advance water recycling and reuse, support community-based water solutions, enhance climate resilience in water management. Urban planning should prioritize green spaces and permeable surfaces to enhance water absorption "
3. **Enhancing water storage and rainwater harvesting systems:** "Blue and green infrastructure implementation."

Results

Looking forward

Ideas for the future...

Health and Well-being

1. **Ensuring access to clean and safe drinking water for all:** "Fresh drinking water should be available to everyone free of charge. Governments should spare no expense or effort in investing in clean drinking water rather than in senseless wars"
2. **Promoting the health benefits of proper hydration:** "Always clean drinking water. Educating the public about the importance of staying hydrated can improve overall health."
3. **Addressing the impact of water quality on public health:** "As we are developing and growing as a society, our resources are growing scarce. I believe it's very important we implement policies that would limit the consumption. We could use 'recycled' water collected from rainfall for certain things because sometimes clean drinking water is not necessary. For example, for cooling down the reactors or on a smaller scale, watering the garden."

Results

Sense-making workshop

Water associated with housing and living conditions

What are stories about?

- Positive feelings: Access to Water → water cuts, travelling. Seen as a positive learning coming from negative experience.
- Negative feelings: Access to Water → short term (water cuts) vs long term (droughts), fairness aspects, water quality

What comes out of the stories?

- High dependency on infrastructure
- Awareness is quite important
- Negative stories: water as a basic need, comes more from rural areas and more awareness of the source of water
- Positive feelings: water more as a luxury good

Key take-aways

- Contrast between the content of stories with negative and positive feelings
- Basic needs are more cited under negative feelings whereas high level of comfort spotted in more positive stories

Water as an economic asset

What are stories about?

- Access to drinking water
- Economic value: stories affect income directly

What comes out of the stories?

- Limited understanding of water issues at sectoral level
- Economic asset understood as indirect costs: cost-savings measures

Key take-aways

- Water mostly taken as a personal cost (people care for their bills)
- Water might be too invisible in sectors
- Potential explanations for misunderstanding: 'economic' (i) comes from "economia" = management of the household and (ii) can be taken as economical (water savings)

Water through the lens of professional life in rural areas

What are stories about?

- Health, basic needs, thirst, hygiene, water quality, philosophical, inspiration of beauty/stress relief, habits
- A lot about domestic use but in professional life
- Little about economic aspect

What comes out of the stories?

- Large variety of professions in rural areas (home care, hydroelectricity, wastewater, farmers, teacher, courier, beer maker, chef) with similar issues (domestic use mostly)
- Awareness comes when water is absent
- Making a living out of water (some stories)

Key take-aways

- Mostly about the need for immediate access
- Water access issues are minimal, often limited to brief outages, highlighting a high standard of comfort in the EU compared to other regions globally.

Water triggering fear but not changing the way of using water

What are stories about?

- Nature degradation (PFAS, eutrophication, extracting activities)
- Climate (flood, drought, heatwave, fire)
- Recreation and risk of drowning
- Impact on food production when little rain
- Need for good infrastructure
- Fear for health

What comes out of the stories?

- More on water access than water quality
- Little mention of actions, lots about awareness
- Hypotheses: personal comfort, cost of action, lack of awareness of complexity, weights of habit/tradition/culture, beyond control feeling

Key take-aways

- Difficult to hypothesise on why no change of water use. Variety of reasons might apply to variety of stories. It also depends on how people interpreted the question.

Insights

Analysis of the findings

Insights

Analysis overview

Insight 1

Awareness of the importance of water primarily relates to health and wellbeing.

Insight 2

Concerns and motivators change depending on the surroundings and contexts. It is prominent for cross-border issues.

Insight 3

Personal beliefs and experiences largely influence people's perceptions and actions.

Insight 4

People feel they can have a significant influence on water-related situations. There is an untapped potential.

Insight 1

Awareness of the importance of water primarily relates to health and wellbeing.

Access to clean water, physical and mental wellbeing, stress relief and emotional and psychological significance of water all translate the importance of water.

- 37% of all stories in the EU relate to health and wellbeing.
- These stories are mostly positive (70%), associated with the grateful and happy emotions.
- **Essential nature of water:** fundamentally important for survival, health, and comfort. People are aware of its value, especially in situations where it is scarce or unavailable.
- **Physical and mental wellbeing:** water is frequently associated with health benefits, such as hydration, cleansing, and therapeutic effects. The stories often link water to physical and mental wellbeing.
- **Emotional and psychological significance + stress relief:** many individuals find comfort and relaxation in water-related activities, such as swimming or simply being near water bodies
- **Practical challenges and solutions:** Stories touch on the practical aspects of water use in daily life (e.g. reliable access to clean water) and the challenges faced when water is scarce, emphasizing the need for reliable access and infrastructure.

→ There is a **paradigm shift** where individuals and communities increasingly recognise water as integral to their health and wellbeing, making it a **core part of their identity** and daily life practices.

“Water improves **well-being**

I became aware of the importance of water when I started working for a company that sold water filters. I realised how important the quality of the water we use is when I worked for this company, and the importance of water for the human body over time, when I started to give myself fully to my work and gradually burn out. I forget to drink a glass of water because there is so much to do and there is always some mysterious "after" time. Although clean water was available immediately. After a while, minor health problems started. Of course, it's not only because I don't use enough water in my body, but it's also one of the factors that can make things worse, for example the visual appearance, fatigue can develop because the body doesn't get enough fluids. [...].

For people with stomach problems and more, warm water helps a lot. A glass of warm water in the morning improves your well-being and creates an appetite..”

“Water for **mental health**

Being near water, or rivers, lakes, the sea, calms and relaxes me. It is important for me, when I am overwhelmed, to have easy access to water reservoirs or other bodies of water. Water is flowing and can take any form, this inspires me and we humans are mostly made of water, so literally, we can assume that we can also learn to deal with whatever situations life brings us.”

Insight 2

Concerns and motivators change depending on the surroundings and contexts. It is prominent for cross-border issues.

Transboundary issues such as the Baltic sea situation and water scarcity in the Mediterranean region align stories' content and emotions.

Environmental and climate change concern as a motivator in the South

- 39% (environmental) and 30% (climate change) concerns vs 33% and 24% in the EU respectively.
- More influence of citizens on the situations described in their stories.
- More stories about housing/living conditions, environment/climate change and community/society.
- More negative feelings (32% vs 24% in the EU), more worry and sadness especially. And less hope.

Water quality and water for wellbeing matter a lot in the Baltic sea region

- The Baltic Sea is vulnerable to pollution and eutrophication.
- Populations in the Baltic sea region seem very sensitive to water quality.
 - Sea water
 - Tap water (excellent in Scandinavia, good in Baltic countries with regional variations)
- Water takes an important role in populations' wellbeing (41% vs 37% in the EU)

- There is a **need for more coordination between countries and different stakeholders** to tackle transboundary water issues
- There is a need for more support to mental wellbeing to avoid increasing eco-anxiety in these regions with higher concern.

"Water and life

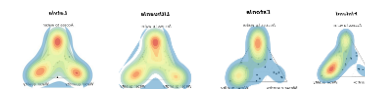
My childhood has been closely linked to water. As a child I spent every holiday with a relative who worked on a hydroelectric dam. For us, it was a means of distraction and fun. These are happy memories that have lasted throughout my life, making my relationship with water always a source of joy. However, the medium is also a cause for concern nowadays, as we are at a time when it is scarce due to lack of rainfall, probably because of the undeniable climate change we are suffering, as well as the pollution of rivers and seas.

"Canary Islands dries up

Water scarcity in the Canary Islands"

"Summer bloom flight

[...] over 20 years ago when I had a chance to fly onboard a frontier guard surveillance aircraft over cyanobacterial blooms in the Baltic Sea in the middle of summer. The wideness of the green spirals, being surrounded by them even though high in the air almost from horizon to horizon made it evident how eutrophicated our sea is. I worked already then for the sea and the experience made me even more motivated to continue that work."

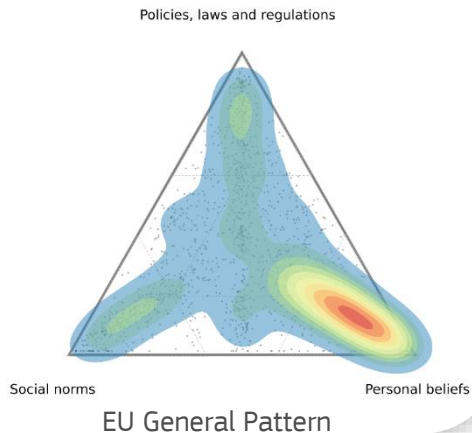


Insight 3

Personal beliefs and experiences largely influence people's perceptions and actions.

Both water disruption (short term water absence) and water scarcity (long term water absence) are strong factors of awareness.

12. What is important in your story?



Lack of water highlights its importance

- People place a higher value on resources that are perceived as scarce (scarcity principle) and tend to prefer avoiding losses rather than acquiring equivalent gains (loss aversion), triggering a stronger emotional response and a more lasting impression
- While some people keep in mind the discomfort a water cut triggers (negative feelings), others take the learning of the bad experience as a positive outcome.

Water in daily activities is prominent

- Water use is deeply integrated into daily routines and habits (e.g., drinking, cooking, cleaning).
- The disruption of daily habits due to the absence of water forces individuals to consciously reflect on its importance and their dependence on it.
- Water is often taken for granted, assuming stable infrastructure

“water mains disconnected to clean pipes

last Friday, the water supply was cut off at our place to clean the pipes. this causes inconvenience with body washing and making coffee. it takes a while before you can continue.”

Realizing importance of water when travelling

“When travelling it is very clear that we forget how privileged we are when we can drink water directly from the tap and not have to worry about whether there is enough or if it is clean”

“Calm living water

I like calm water. In my retirement, I have a lot of time to go for walks. My walk often takes me to the castle pond nearby. It's surrounded by tall trees. I sit on the bench and look out over the water. I always discover something new. I have already taken many beautiful pictures of how the trees are reflected in the water, or when it rains and the surface and the reflection look like a painting. If you take a closer look, it is full of life (tadpoles, water lilies etc.) It would be very sad if it no longer existed The large fountain has been dry for 3 years. The municipality has to save water and energy.”

- **Communication strategies** could be used to **shift cultural and social norms**, by acknowledging the variety of personal beliefs and experiences.
- Framing narratives on water according to what most resonates with people could help build awareness and trigger behaviour change.

Insight 4

People feel they can have a significant influence on water-related situations. There is an untapped potential.

Bottom-up approaches as a complement to policies

- 50% of participants feel they can influence the situation in their story from a good to a large extent
- Some highlight how through education they can make an impact on youngsters.
- Others highlight how awareness built in them motivated them trigger such awareness and change behaviour in others.

→ **Engaging and empowering citizens** could play a more important role in addressing water challenges and promoting sustainable practices. It highlights the importance of fostering **community involvement** and **leveraging the collective impact of individual actions**.

→ The Mission EU strategy is one way forward

“People for water, water for people

I'm a first grade teacher. I am very aware of the importance of shaping children from a young age in their relationship with nature. Preferably by personal example and practical instructions for activities to make them aware of themselves"

“A Child's Awakening to the Power of Water

“One day I approached the river bank. I dipped my fingers in the water and felt its cool embrace on my skin. But instead of withdrawing my hand in joy, I recoiled in horror from the dirt clinging to my fingertips. [...]

From that day on, I became a champion for clean water. I organized community cleanup efforts, lobbied local governments for stricter environmental regulations, and educated my peers on the importance of keeping water clean. My actions inspired others to join the cause and started a city-wide environmental movement. [...]"

Limitations

Methodology specificities, data amount and balance

- The methodology employed gathers stories, indicating that interpretations of the responses to the signifier questions should not be taken as answers to opinion questions as in a classical survey. The stories reflect specific instances of what makes water important in the respondents' lives, rather than their overall opinion or view on water. This is not a limitation per se but could be one for those interested in general opinions. It is however a strength for those interested in grounding their reflections in citizens' and stakeholders' experiences of water.
- In some countries, the amount of data collected is less substantial, which limits the power of interpretation. This is particularly true for Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Sweden, and Estonia, where several respondents marked "not applicable" for some of the questions.
- While there is a good balance of citizens across EU Member States, the stakeholders we gathered are not balanced across sectors. This imbalance is due to the voluntary nature of the request, as participants were not recruited or compensated for their participation. The collaboration with DGs to disseminate the stories collector to their networks also contributed to this unevenness. Some DGs agreed to cooperate, while others did not.

Next steps

Disseminate the data and let people explore

Given the richness of the collected data, it is not feasible to explore all insights comprehensively within this initial study. Therefore, we will make the interactive dashboard available to policymakers and scientists from the European Commission who wish to delve deeper into the data and analyze the stories through their specific lenses.

- **Dashboard Accessibility:**
 - **Availability:** The interactive dashboard will be shared with relevant departments within the European Commission.
 - **Training:** Provide introductory training sessions to ensure users can effectively navigate and utilise the dashboard and correctly interpret the stories.
- **Targeted Analyses by DGs:**
 - **DG HOME:** Will apply a security lens to analyze water-related stories, focusing on issues such as water security, infrastructure protection, and the implications of water scarcity on national and regional stability.
 - **DG ENV:** As part of the WaterWise awareness campaign, DG ENV will use the dashboard to focus on specific Member States. They will be able to tailor the campaign by identifying and addressing the unique water concerns and priorities of each Member State, providing guidelines and strategies that resonate with local issues and public sentiment.
- **Collaborative Workshops:**
 - **Organise workshops** with different DGs to collaboratively explore the data and identify cross-cutting themes and insights that can inform policy and strategy development.
 - **Facilitate interdisciplinary discussions** to leverage the diverse perspectives and expertise within the European Commission
- **Data Availability**
 - We will allow researchers to have access to the data to explore it as they need.

Find out more



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EU Science, Research and Innovation



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- EU Policy Lab: <https://policy-lab.ec.europa.eu>

Appendix

Main insights and take-aways by Voices that Count

Overall trends

- Water stories are mostly about health/wellbeing, recreation/tourism, housing/living conditions and environment/climate. **Nearly half of the stories (partly) refer to drinking water.** About 10-15% of the stories mention the sea or the ocean. Slightly less stories mention rivers, lakes or other freshwater bodies. The remaining part talks about water in general.
- **Access to water** dominates as the most important issue in the stories, compared to 'water quality' and 'water quantity'.
- **Most people (37%) link their experiences to health and wellbeing.** This ranges from general physical wellbeing from drinking water (hydration), through swimming and stress relief, to very specific benefits such as skin care. In half of these stories about health and wellbeing, people see the role of water as 'support for life'. This is also reflected in the many metaphors about water used throughout the experiences: **"Water is life"**. However, of all the experiences collected, only 8 stories explicitly/literally mention water as a basic human right.
- **62% of the stories are only associated with positive feelings** (people feel 'happy' and 'grateful'). Stories about spirituality/religion, culture/tradition, recreation/tourism, health/wellbeing and fishery/maritime affairs are most associated with only positive feelings.
- **24% of the stories are only associated with negative feelings** (people especially feel 'worried'). Stories about housing/living conditions (many stories about temporary water cut-offs) and environment/climate, are most associated with only negative feelings. Respondents who say that 'taking care of the environment' is the most important thing for them in the coming years, tell more stories associated with the feeling of 'worried' (compared to people who say that 'taking care of myself' or 'taking care of others' is the most important thing for them in the coming years).
- In stories about **housing/living conditions**, people talk about drinking water and the water that is used in everyday life (shower, toilet, etc.). Many stories mention the **water supply** being **temporary interrupted**, leading to an **awareness** about the fact that having (clean) running water from the tap is not a given.
- In the stories where water is linked to **socio-cultural aspects**, we notice the role of **water as a connector** to place, nature and the senses, mainly in recreational settings (swimming, bathing, fishing, ...). About 10% of the stories talk about **"water nostalgia"**: childhood memories related to water, pleasant moments near lakes, rivers or the sea, and/or the impact of these moments in today's life. Very few stories talk about collective action.
- **Few people link their stories to industry, trade (3%), economy or finance (3%) or mobility & transport (3%).** It is clearly not top of mind. Where people do talk about it, it is mostly about an awareness of the importance of water for society as a whole. Or people talk about the use of water in professional activities, such as agriculture, but also in sectors/professions one might not immediately associate with water. Economy is also understood as the water bill, supply & infrastructure, and the aspect of fairness related to these.
- **Personal wellbeing and life experience mostly shape perceptions, thinking and actions described in the stories**, followed by environment and climate change concerns.
- There is a clear tendency towards **people seeing an influence for themselves to act on the situation described in their story**, compared to 'it's beyond my control'. Storytellers who say that caring for the environment will be most important to them in the coming years see themselves as having more influence.
- Compared to citizens and governments, businesses are seen as the least influential on the situation described in people's stories.
- The majority of the people also indicate that what they describe in their story changed the way they think about and use water. This pattern does not change significantly by age, gender, living area or country.
- Where do people link their stories to **opportunities to act or influence themselves, in relation to 'hope for the future'**? Most of the stories talk about 1) drinking more water or having access to clean water for health reasons 2) water as a way to relax. **Apart from the Mediterranean region, only a minority of these stories talk about saving water and using it more efficiently.**
- **"Water worries"**, associated with 'fear for the future' are mostly related to access of water: (fear for) water shortages, including a strong awareness of our dependence on water. These water worries lead to action (change in water use) when there's an emotional impact: experiencing a heatwave or drought, or seeing this happening in other regions. On the other side, people don't act when they feel powerless ('it's a problem that is too big') and the experience of the water supply being temporarily interrupted generally doesn't make people change their behaviour.
- Water availability and water quality are the two aspects that people consider most important for sustainable water use in the future. A healthy nature comes third.

Regional or country differences

- In the **Mediterranean countries**, people associate their stories much more with climate change and the environment, especially in Spain (see text box below). These are also the aspects that most strongly shaped people's perceptions, thinking and/or actions in that region. Compared to all the other EU countries, the Maltese link their stories most to environmental concern and access to water. The Spanish most to climate change.
- Stories from the Mediterranean region (specifically people from Cyprus, France, Italy, Malta, Portugal, and Spain) are often associated with negative feelings. The stories from Cyprus and Portugal stand out as the most negative stories.
- Also in the Mediterranean region: in stories where people see government influence, almost all of these stories are linked to access to water
- In the **Baltic Sea region and the Danube region** people associated their stories much more with 'hope for the future' compared to the general EU trend. The stories from **Austria** stand out as the **most positive stories**.
- The Germans shared much more stories about recreation/tourism (53%). The majority are holiday stories in other countries
- When asked about the sustainable use of water in the future, we notice that in addition to water availability and water quality, the following issues are more prominent in the stories of specific countries (compared to the general EU pattern):
 - Climate change, mitigation and adaptation (Spain, Malta, Hungary)
 - Access and equity (France, Belgium)
 - Water governance (Poland)
 - Community engagement and education (Italy)

Spain

- People from Spain (166 stories) mostly talk about how precious water is for all life. 30% of the stories from Spain are linked to environment/climate. This the number one topic for Spain. The themes that immediately jump out are water scarcity and severe droughts.
- However, an equal percentage of stories (30%) are linked to health & wellbeing. For many people water is associated with physical and mental health: stories mention the benefits of swimming, sailing and just enjoying being on or near the water. Many stories from Spain express a sense of deep connection to the sea, rivers, and lakes.
- Roles of water that are more important in the stories of Spain, compared to the rest of the EU, are 1) 'Agricultural' (16%) 2) 'Habitat for biodiversity' (16%)
- The feelings 'worried' (27%) and 'sad' (19%) are much more present compared to the overall EU trend. There is a general the general concern about the future of water and how the country will be able to supply people with enough water; combined with sadness that reservoirs are drying up. The need for water conservation is a recurring theme in many stories.
- A distinct group is more outspoken compared to the general EU trend about that fact that their water stories/experiences changed their thinking and use of water.
- Most of the stories that people connect to 'opportunities', relate to ways of trying to reduce water use or irrigation solutions.
- What people share in their stories is very much influenced by 'current needs and issues', compared to traditions and future aspirations. Even slightly more so than in the rest of the EU.
- For storytellers living in Spain, 'water availability' is the most important matter for sustainable use of water in the future. Compared to other EU countries the following issues stand out: Climate change mitigation and adaptation, Access and Equity, Community Engagement and Education.
- *NB: Respondents from Spain are generally a bit older compared to the overall EU respondents.*

Finland

- Finland is the country where people associate their stories most strongly with **'water quality'**. The Finns are grateful for this having an abundance of clean and fresh water.
- 1/5 of the stories from Finland are associated with **pride** and much fewer stories are associated with worry. The availability of clean tap water is generally seen as a privilege (compared to the situation in Asia, Africa and other places).
- Many stories talk about the joy of always being close to a lake, river or other source of clean water. Finland stands out with the highest number of stories where the role of water is seen as **recreational** (45%). Of all the countries, the Finns share most experiences where they see the role of water as **therapeutic or good for general wellbeing** (only Austria has a slightly higher percentage).
- Respondents in Finland deviate slightly from the general pattern in that they are more likely to say that 'tradition and customs' influence their water stories (compared to current issues or future aspirations).
- Fishery / Maritime affairs are more important compared to the general EU pattern.
- *NB: More respondents from Finland live in coastal regions and a suburban areas compared to the general pattern and fewer people live in rural areas*

Romania

- Romanians generally talk in their stories about the **fundamental role of water in sustaining human life**. Many stories in Romania take a holistic perspective and talk about the need to **respect water** on a global scale. Several stories literally mention that 'water is life'.
- Although most of the storytellers come from urban areas, food&agriculture is very much linked to the stories. They connect water with **food for life**. People talk about vegetable gardens and the importance and use of water for gardening. Agriculture as an economic sector is hardly present.
- The stories in Romania also mention concerns about water pollution and taking better care of the environment, but there is little mention of scarcity or fear of drought. There is some concern about water infrastructure.
- The water stories from Romania are more linked to a hopeful future and seeing more opportunities
- Respondents in Romania deviate from the general pattern in that they are more likely to indicate that 'business' is (co-)influencing the situation in their story. How exactly is not very clear from the stories: they seem to link it mainly to access to water (water companies?), but also to general health issues.
- *NB: In Romania, almost 9 out of 10 respondents live in urban areas as compared to the general pattern from the whole set of water stories (87% vs 58%).*

Differences between rural and urban areas

- Respondents who think that people like themselves can influence the situation described in the stories are slightly more likely to come from urban areas. They are also slightly more likely to link their story to future aspirations and to personal beliefs.
- In the stories from respondents living in/near rural areas we see a slight tendency towards being more worried about the future, compared to respondents living in (sub)urban areas.

Gender differences

- Generally not a lot of differences in the patterns
- Women relate their stories more strongly with personal beliefs, compared to social norms and policies, laws and regulations. The importance of policies, laws and regulations is slightly greater in men's stories than in women's.
- Women share more stories about water in relation to housing/living conditions

Differences between stakeholders and citizens

- Water availability is much more important in the stories of citizens than in those of the stakeholders.
- Stakeholders talk much more about Environment/Climate (60%) in their water stories.
- When we look at the stories shared by stakeholders, we see the role of water as 'natural resource', 'agricultural', 'habitat for diversity', 'political' and 'historical significance' appear more frequently in comparison to the stories shared by citizens.
- Stakeholders link their stories more to policies/laws/regulations compared to personal beliefs and social norms

Differences between types of water mentioned in the stories

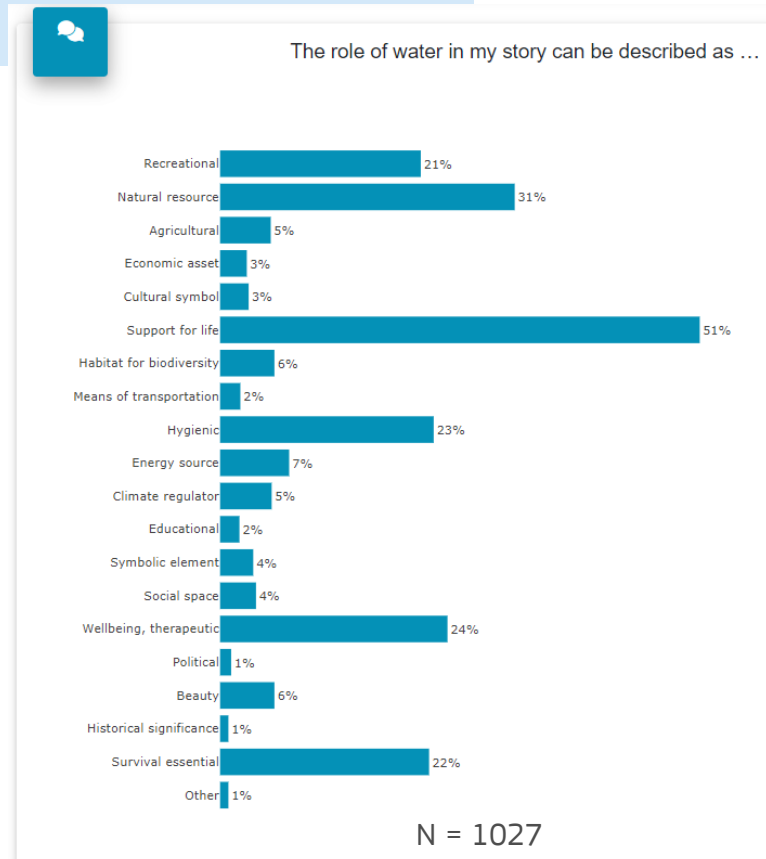
- **Drinking water:** the most important pattern related to drinking water is one of appreciation and gratitude: realizing the importance of water for survival and expressing gratitude for access to it; taking water for granted until its availability is disrupted, leading to a newfound appreciation; recognizing water's essential role in maintaining health and cleanliness; expressing concern about its scarcity and unequal access globally. Only 35-40 stories explicitly talk about bottled water.
- **Freshwater:** besides the emotional and nostalgic connection, the dominant pattern that reveals conservation and taking measures to conserve it: mindfulness in reducing water usage and reusing water; recognizing the importance of clean and accessible water, and taking measures to conserve it.
- **Sea water:** the most dominant pattern is one of deep appreciation and recognition of the ocean's vital importance for life, and acting upon it. Recreational activities also stand out in combination with feelings of nostalgia, peace, tranquillity, and happiness.

Supplementary analysis by Voices that Count

Insight 1

Awareness of the importance of water primarily relates to health and wellbeing.

In half of the 1027 stories (= 37% of the total stories) that talk about health and wellbeing, people see the **role of water as 'support for life'**



Insight 1

Awareness of the importance of water primarily relates to health and wellbeing.

This is also reflected in the many **metaphors** about water used throughout the experiences that people shared

However, from all the collected experiences, only 8 stories explicitly/literally mention water as a basic human right!!

"Water is life" (60 stories)

- "Water is life" - 27 stories
- "Water is the elixir of life" - 3 stories
- "Water is the source of life" - 5 stories
- "Water is essential/needed for life" - 8 stories
- "Water is the basis of life" - 3 stories
- "Water is the most important factor for life" - 4 stories
- "Water is the essence of life" - 2 stories
- "Water equals life" - 3 stories
- "Water gives life" - 2 stories
- "Water is the lifeblood" - 2 stories
- "Water is the foundation of life" - 1 story
- "Water is health" - 2 stories
- "Water is the source of health" - 1 story

Water is expensive&precious (10 stories)

- "Water is gold"/"Liquid gold"/"Water over gold" - 6 stories
- "Water is more precious than gold" - 2 stories
- "Water is a treasure" - 2 stories

Other:

- "Water is the driving force of all nature" - 2 stories
- "Water is an asset" - 1 story
- "Water is everything" - 1 story
- "Water is the most important thing" - 2 stories
- "Water is food" - 2 stories
- "Water is my therapist, my support and my helper" - 1 story
- "Water is salvation": 1 story.

Water = health

For many people, there is a clear link between water and health. This ranges from overall physical wellbeing by drinking water and swimming in water, through mental health benefits by enjoying the soothing sights and sounds of water, to very specific benefits like skin care and relief. Beyond the personal benefits, there is a strong sense that 'water is life' and is crucial for all life on earth.

How is 'health' present in the stories? In order of prominence:

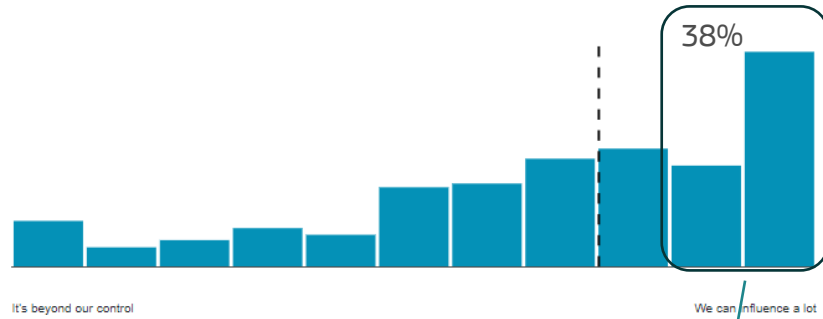
1. water stories related to physical health and general wellbeing;
2. water stories related to effects on mental health;
3. water stories related to specific health benefits;
4. water stories related to the general idea that water is life;
5. water stories of deep personal change.

Insight 4

People feel they can have a significant influence on water-related situations. There is an untapped potential.



How much can people like you influence the situation described in your story?(N=2751)

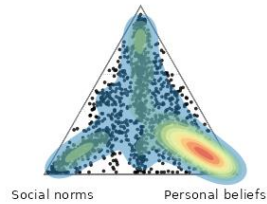


The demographic parameters in these 38% of stories follow the general pattern, except that we find slightly more stories from urban areas at this side of the slider (62% compared to 58%).

Compared to the overall pattern, people who indicate that they can influence the situation a lot, link their story more with future aspirations and **more strongly with personal beliefs**. Looking into this group (stories situated in that corner), we see that the **urban citizens** dominate even more strongly (66%).

12. What is important in your story?

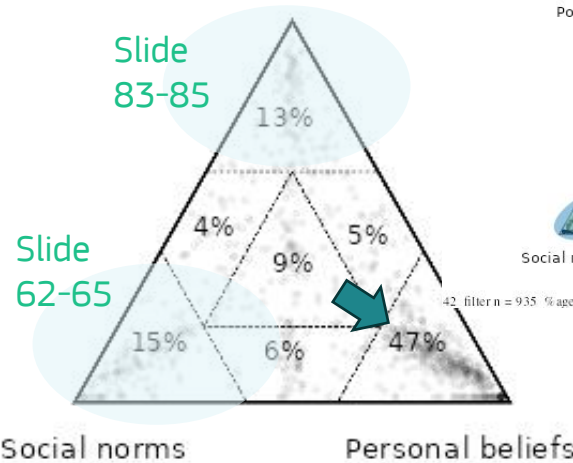
Policies, laws and regulations



General pattern
(all stories)

12. What is important in your story?

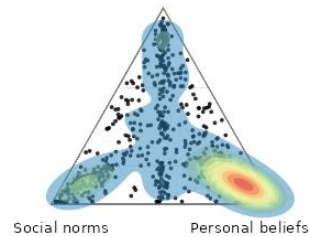
Policies, laws and regulations



42 filter n = 935 %age = 40% filter N/A = 111 mu = L:23 T: 9 R: 68

12. What is important in your story?

Policies, laws and regulations



11. What I share in my story is influenced by ...

current needs and issues

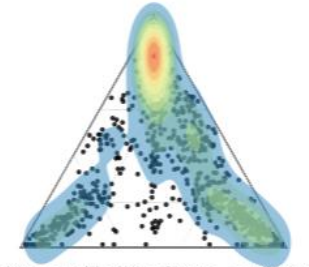


tradition and habits future aspirations

52 filter n = 977 %age = 39% filter N/A = 69 mu = L:25 T: 31 R: 43

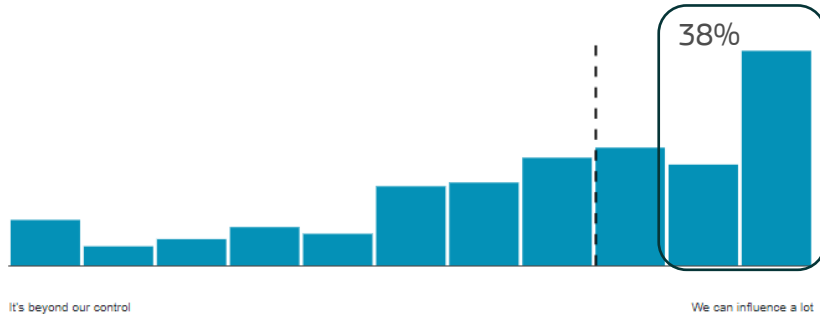
11. What I share in my story is influenced by ...

current needs and issues



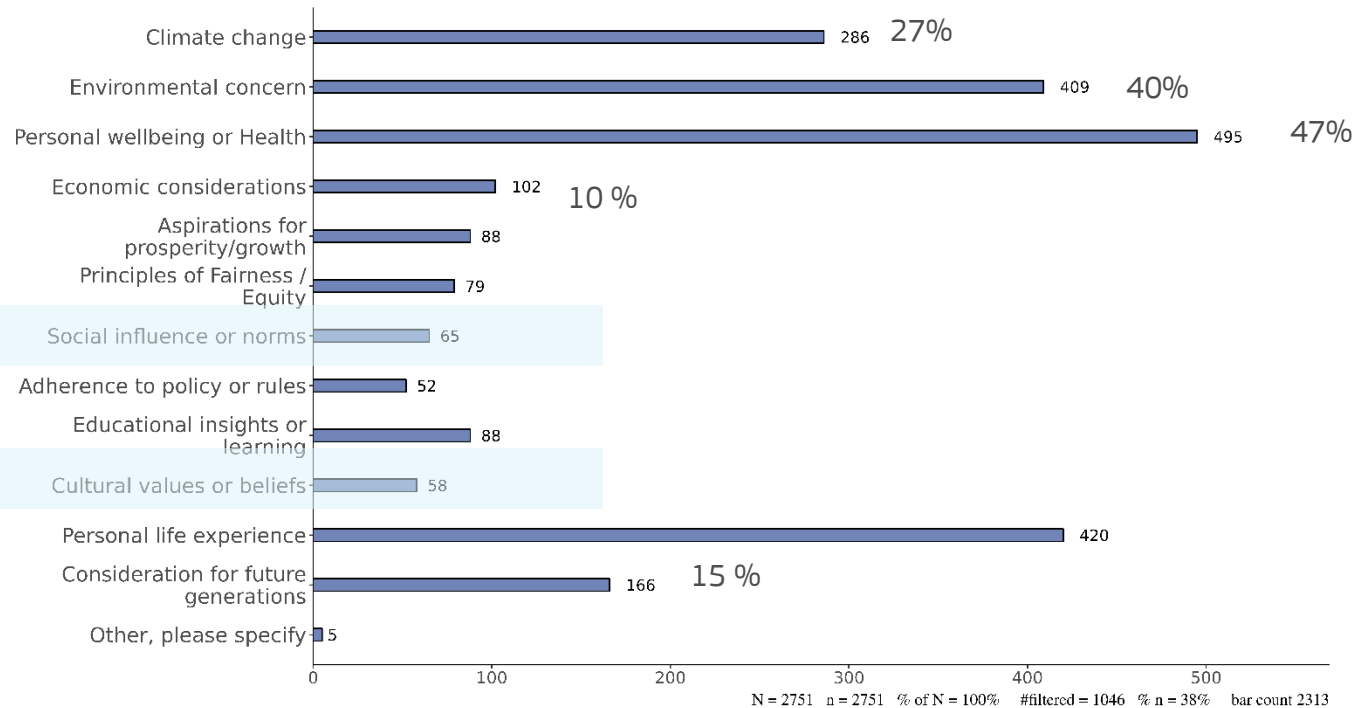


How much can people like you influence the situation described in your story?(N=2751)



Compared to the overall/general pattern, people who indicate that they can highly influence the situation related to the issues they talk about, connect their experiences more to thinking, perceptions or actions that are shaped by **environmental concerns, climate change or future generations**. Also slightly more economic considerations. However, the dominant aspect remains personal wellbeing and health.

5. In my story, the aspects that most prominently shaped my perceptions, thinking and/or actions in relation to water are ... (max 3 answers)

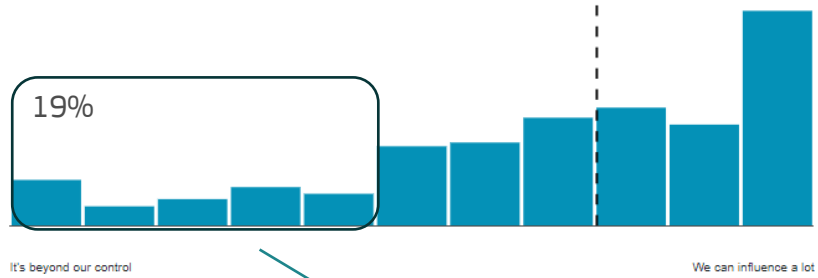


Slide 62-65

Slide 62-65

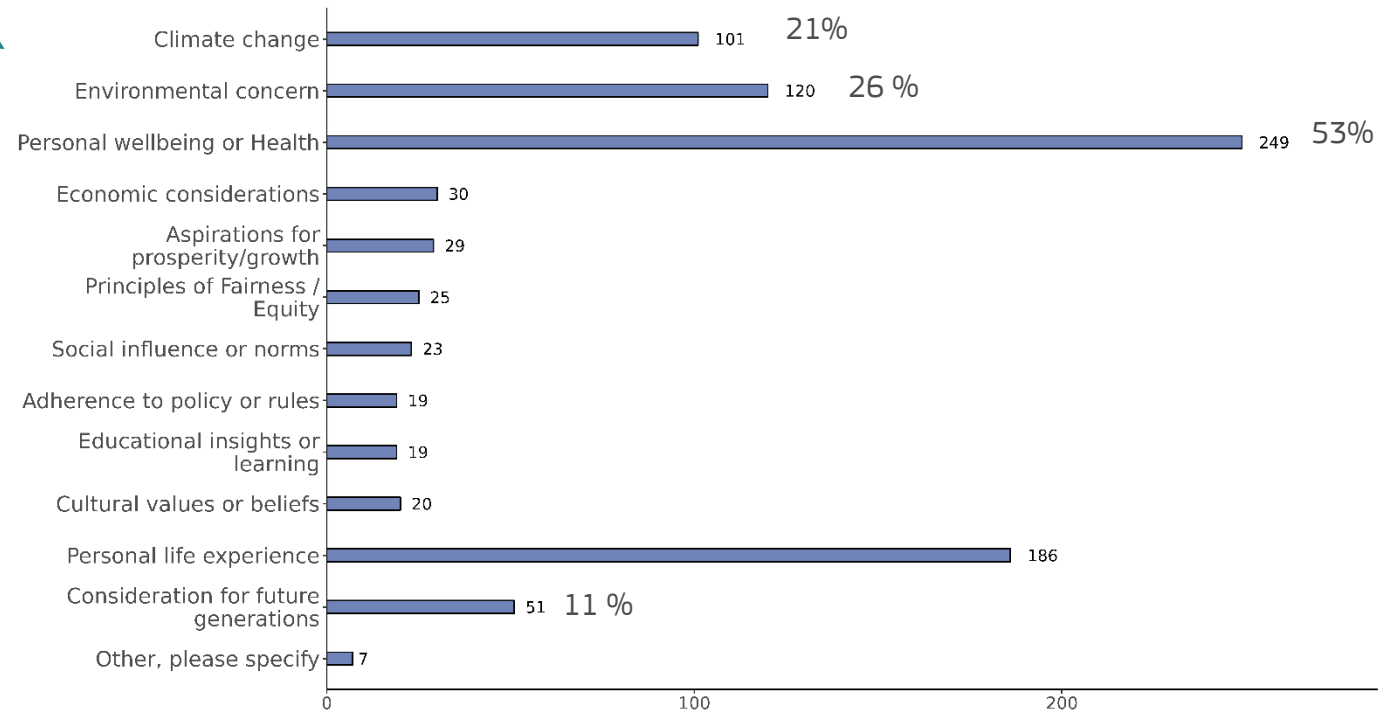


How much can people like you influence the situation described in your story?(N=2751)



Compared to the overall/general pattern, people who indicate that the issues they talk about are beyond their control, link their experiences **slightly less** to thinking, perceptions or actions that are shaped by climate change and environmental concerns and consideration for future generations. Slightly more connection of these experiences to personal wellbeing and health.

5. In my story, the aspects that most prominently shaped my perceptions, thinking and/or actions in relation to water are ... (max 3 answers)



Social norms, culture & values

- **Awareness, realising that “water is life”**

- We see this theme especially in experiences that talk about drinking water and the water that is used in **daily life** (shower, toilet, etc.). Sometimes combined with a more efficient water use
- We also see stories about temporarily lack of water and as a result realising how fragile water supply is, that it's not to be taken for granted
- **Family life changing** because of connection to public water systems, having to buy bottled water instead of using tap water, etc.
- Losing **jobs** because of drought
- Water in **life rituals**: baptism, spiritual awakening, ramadan/fasting

Every water drop counts

Awareness on how to use water at home and at work. I continuously check that water taps are closed well as every water drop counts.
(woman from Malta)

Water is work, water is life

I live in the south of Spain, in Seville, close to irrigated crops and I have seen how my family has been unable to grow tomatoes in the Marismas because of the drought, losing their jobs as a result. We have to take care of water, we have to understand that it is something we cannot manufacture, it is unique.
(woman from Spain)

The drinking water

I lived in a situation where water had to be carried home in buckets/cans from the apartment, about 800 meters away. Water was the family's most treasured possession and our lives changed when we moved to an apartment where drinking water was piped into the apartment.
(woman from Hungary)

Social norms, culture & values

- **Water as connector:**

- Social activities: having fun together, swimming, sports, bathing, go fishing, holidays. A lot of these stories refer to **childhood memories** (see next slide)
- Connection to **nature & senses** (beauty, emotional wellbeing, ...)
- Working together as a **community** to safeguard wells, irrigation schemes
- **Connection to place, identity & roots:** being lucky to live in a country where there is a lot of water (Finland) or confrontation with other countries (e.g. African countries where water is scarce), seeing 'water change' in own region (dry rivers, water reservoirs, etc.)

Galicia, the land that was once water

I live in Galicia, a region known for its regular and heavy rainfall. But for the last decade, it has been noticeably drier in the winters. It rains less days and for less time. We have been hearing for several years that the reservoirs are at a minimum before the arrival of summer, that there will be drought and in some towns near my city there have been water restrictions several times. Ten years ago this was inconceivable, as a land famous for its rivers, aquifers, eternal rainfalls... It could, in the near future, have no water at all... (woman from Spain)

Connectivity with water

As a child, I used to go fishing with my grandfather and my parents. For me, water is a symbol of togetherness and connection with family members. (man from Slovenia)

Water is Sown

I live in the countryside. When I was little and we used to go to the mountains, I used to see the water running through the "Regueras" there and the meadows where the goats and cows grazed were green. We used to stop there in the heat. It was cool and humid. All that was abandoned, there were no more goatherds or goats, no more cowboys or cows. We would go up to the meadows and they were dry. All that water planting, abandoned. Those springs no longer gave water. Dry springs. A few years ago, thanks to the Irrigation Association and volunteers, these mountain springs are being recovered. A great work is being done and a great job, because we have to recover everything that our ancestors did. A common good that we must not lose. (woman from Spain)

“Water nostalgia”

208 stories mention the word ‘child’

- The vast majority talks about childhood memories related to water, or about swimming and other pleasant moments near lakes, rivers or the sea with (their) children
- *Less present in these stories: images of children (in Africa and other countries) deprived of water, experiences of nearly drowning as a child*

Other stories (without explicit mentioning of ‘child’ or ‘childhood’) equally reveal those **nostalgic moments and its effect in today’s life.**

Communication potential to tap into these memories?!

Water...life

When I was little, I lived in an area where we used clean spring water, for drinking, cooking, bathing... for everything. In the summer, we would swim in the left side of that stream, no matter how shallow or deep it was in some places, we saw every pebble and grass at the bottom. It is the most beautiful memory of my childhood... and it is connected with WATER. I adore the purity that the word water immediately gives me. Of course, today, when I pay for every drop of water and artificially clean it....I appreciate that part of my life when I enjoyed free 100x better basic things for life.
(woman from Croatia)

The fragility of abundance

[...] In the early summer when the reservoir was almost full, hundreds of fish were lying next to the retaining wall and floating in the greenish water.

All this made me internalise how fragile the blue planet can be, the water planet that is nevertheless called Earth. And it reminded me how easy it is to lose what we have and how difficult it is to reverse those losses; in fact, the great river of beaches, games, fishing and beach bars that I knew as a child, in my early teenage years was declared polluted and banned for bathing in the whole province. And that ban is still in force 52 years later.

(man from Spain)

Swimming

263 stories are about swimming, and the vast majority (210) are linked to very positive feelings.

The stories associated to negative (30) feelings are linked to the danger of water, they talk about nearly drowning experiences. Also the negative effects of pollution are present in those stories.

> Since swimming is quite present in the stories and greatly associated to positive feelings > potential to use this as an entry point for actions towards cleaner (river & sea) water or sustainable water management??

memory of a river

I remember an afternoon in September. It was a very hot day and we used to go swimming in a mountain stream that ran next to our house. Some kids my age and I used to make dams to create a little lake. The water was fantastic, clear, pure and warm. The girls sunbathed on the huge flat rocks. In autumn, the river was very small, without much flow. But in spring, when the snow melted, it could become enormous and flood part of the valley.

(man from France)

Total relaxation

I am an adolescent and cruise the Frisian lakes in a motorboat, staring at the waves and forgetting everything that is difficult. Complete relaxation the water gives me whether I am swimming on a boat or staring at it. Going on holiday to Norway with my partner as adults. Seeing every waterfall we are near, visiting every stream or river and again total relaxation and all adult problems are solved in the water.

(woman from the Netherlands)

The situation in the Baltic Sea worries me

Sailing in the Baltic Sea in the summer, we were sailing through thick blue-green algae and we realised that our waterways are not in good shape and hopefully this will get easier in the future, not just worse. I am grateful for clean water where I can swim and spend time. Clean water is fresh and it doesn't smell bad. I try not to make the Baltic Sea worse by not littering and not throwing anything that doesn't belong in the water, and I also try to live my life in a way that is better for the environment.

(woman from Finland)

Collective action

- Very few stories talk about collective action
 - Teachers who organise awareness-raising events related to water use or water pollution
 - Mutual support during or after extreme water events (floodings, droughts)
 - Government-initiated action in which community is asked to participate
 - Stories about restoring old irrigation channels (Spain & Portugal)

Awareness day

As part of my work, I'm organising a half-day awareness-raising event for my pupils on water issues, including the difficulty of accessing this resource around the world, the water cycle and ways of protecting it. (woman from France)

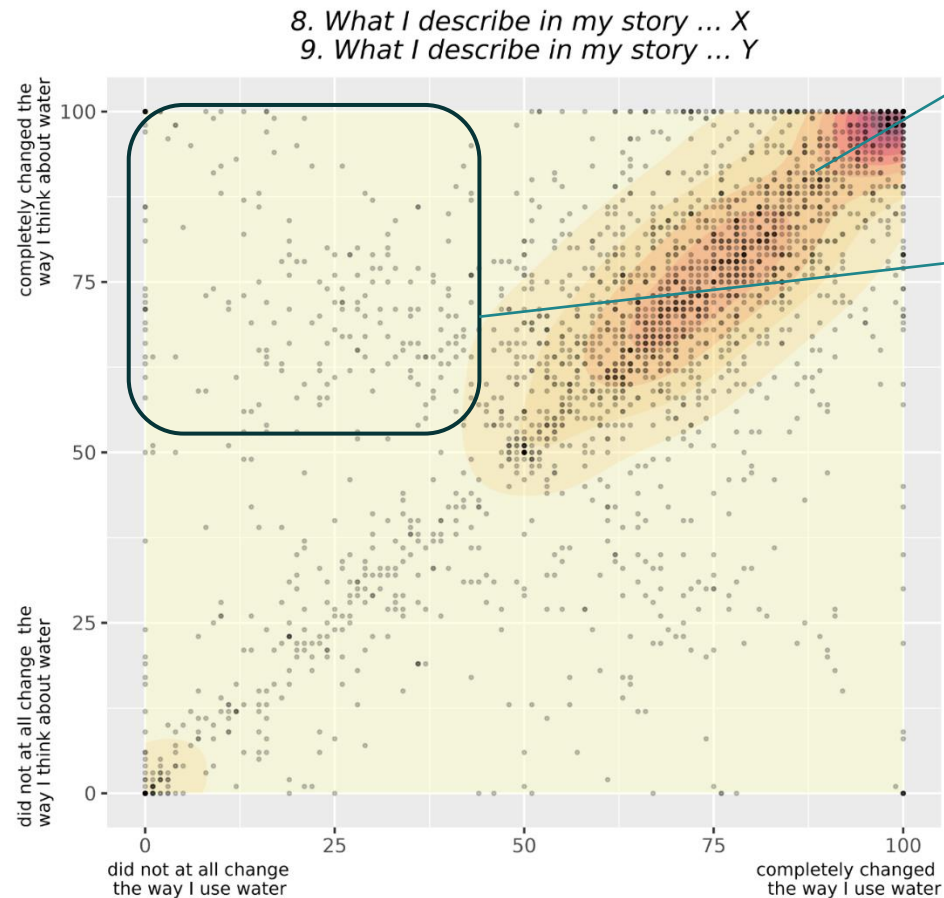
From Waterschei to Water District

[..] Involving citizens in sustainable water management is crucial. After all, the vast majority of paving in Waterschei is on private land. In Waterrijk Waterschei, we were looking for a stimulating approach that encourages residents to increase rainwater collection and infiltration, softening and greening on their own property. [...] Various strategies were tested: water talks, water deals, water parade ... As a result, 8 residents in Waterschei ended up providing a total of 11 extra rain barrels and 2 residents had their drainpipe infiltrated in their garden. (professional from Belgium)

Girlhood

Near my parents' house, in a village on the slopes of the Caramulo mountain range, there's a river where, when I was a little girl, we used to go to bathe, and where the water was diverted to water the crops in the fields. I remember how, at the beginning of summer, everyone in the village would get together to clean the channels through which the water would pass until it reached the fields. There were no wells, no engines, just this way. I remember this period of my life in the village and how water was such a precious commodity. (woman from Portugal)

The intention – action gap?



Most storytellers indicate that what they described in their story changed the way they think about water and changed the way they use water.

In the stories that people link to a change of thinking but not to a change in their (personal) use of water, we find much less stories about drinking water (compared to the overall trend). And the people that do talk about it are very much aware of its value (and presumably they already changed habits or use water consciously since many years?)

Many stories describe moments near the sea. Sometimes becoming aware of pollution of the sea, lakes, rivers (but without actions taken related to personal water use at home?)

Very present in the stories are feelings of freedom, serenity, relaxation, etc. near water or in a swimming pool (e.g. on holidays), or relaxing moments of taking a shower after work or doing water sports. (people are less likely to change habits when it's about those 'luxury' moments of relaxation?)

Insight 6

Little mention of economic issues related to water

Only few people link their stories to industry, trade (3%), economy or finance (3%) or mobility & transport (3%). It is clearly not top of mind.

What kind of experiences do people talk about, related to these issues?

- From the shared experiences of using water for personal health and hygiene, there is an awareness of its importance to society as a whole (holistic view on water): the importance of access to clean water for all. They connect water to livelihoods, including economy/income. Sometimes the stories are related to a comparison with other/poor countries.
- Apart from stories from experts working in water management or the water industry, quite a few stories talk about the use of water in professional activities, such as agriculture, but also in sectors/professions one might not immediately associate with water (bartender, office worker, market vendor, hair stylist ...)

“My profession is water

They can say that professionally without water my work could not exist! I am a hair stylist.”

(woman from Italy)

Water in the Czech Republic

The water is unique. It is not only important for life, but can also be used in industry. It is important in shipping and maritime transport, it can carry huge weights and makes it easy to lift ships to height in the river lock system. Water also enables efficient energy storage in hydroelectric power stations. I guess I only realised the importance of water when I saw stories of people in Africa walking for a few litres of water for hours a day or in turn when we had major floods, then water is important too as it can be dangerous.

(man from Czechia, not a stakeholder)

Importance

Whenever water isn't accessible, I am aware of how vital it is in all walks of life: cleaning, drinking, boiling, washing. It affects every aspect of people's daily lives but because of how readily accessible it is, people forget how important it is.

(woman from Ireland)

Economy is also: the cost of water access, supply & infrastructure

- **The water bill** appears in a number of stories: people talk about saving water as a cost-saving measure in their personal lives.
- And some talk about the **fear of privatisation of the water supply**.
- A few stories talk about storms & other **extreme water events and their impact on infrastructure** (rebuilding costs money). Or vice versa: certain infrastructure built causes more flooding of rivers.
- Water as a (potential) global energy source & sector is only mentioned in a few stories ('energy' is more related to the personal level > 'water as a source of energy for my body').
- **Fairness was mentioned a few times:** equal access to water + water is used for swimming pools and other perhaps non-essential activities

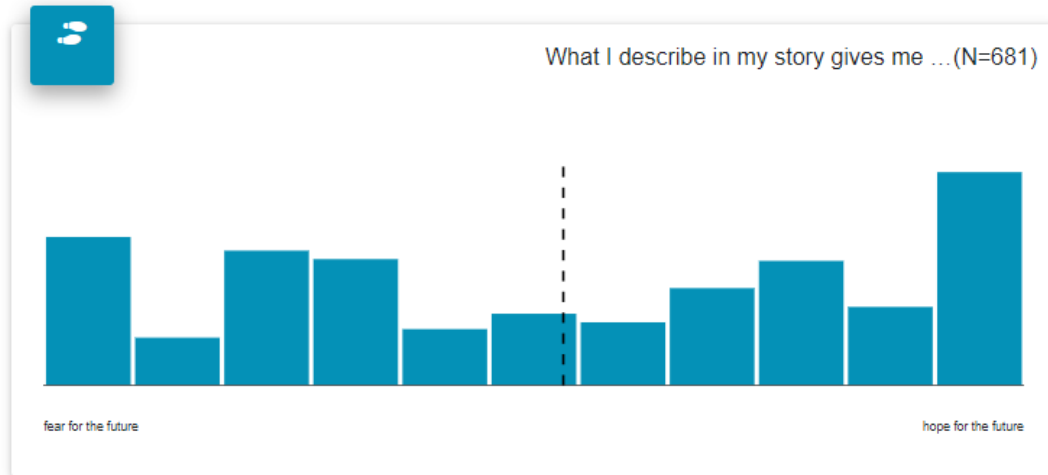
flooding

I live in a town near the Oder River, and one year the river flooded, 2 bridges were destroyed, thousands of crops were destroyed, Wroclaw was flooded, and in my basement the water was pouring between the bricks.
(woman from Poland)

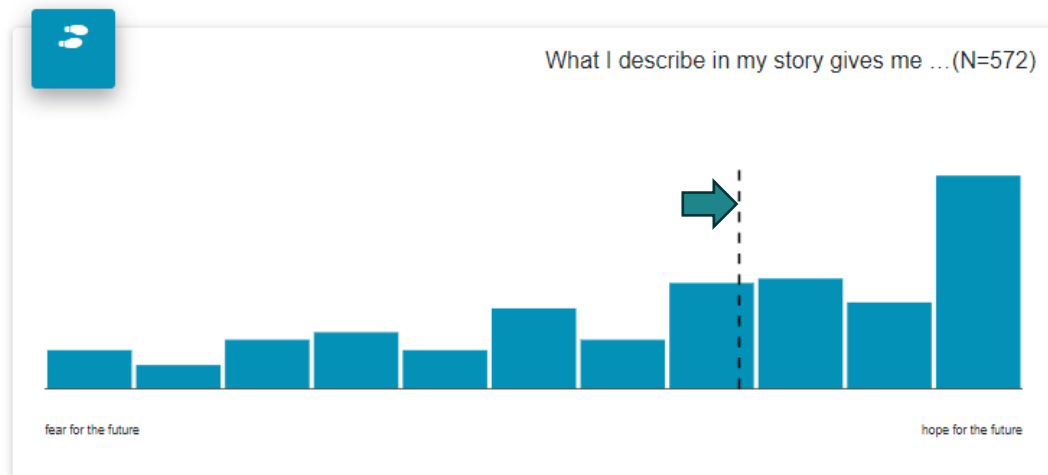
Life force

We here in Malta are surrounded by it. It is what mainly keeps our economic income afloat with tourism and such things.. but on a more personal level it is energy. It is the cycles of the moon that reflect here in earth, as the tides move with it. It is the water we use to survive once filtered through reverse osmosis plants. It is a life force filled with life [...]
(non-binary person from Malta)

Hope or fear for the future

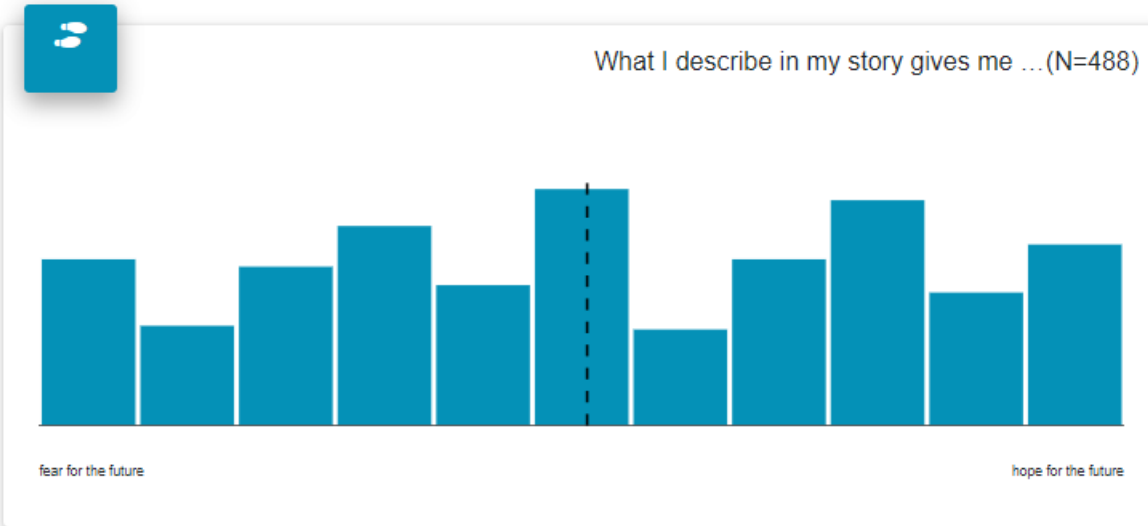


Mediterranean:
Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Spain,
Portugal

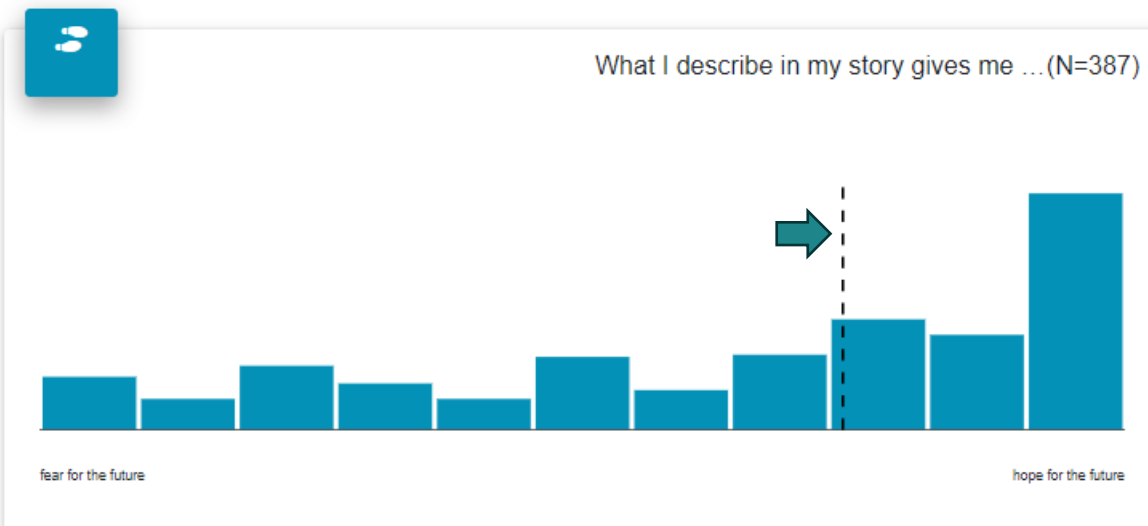


Baltic Sea (without Germany):
Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia,
Lithuania, Poland, Sweden

Hope or fear for the future

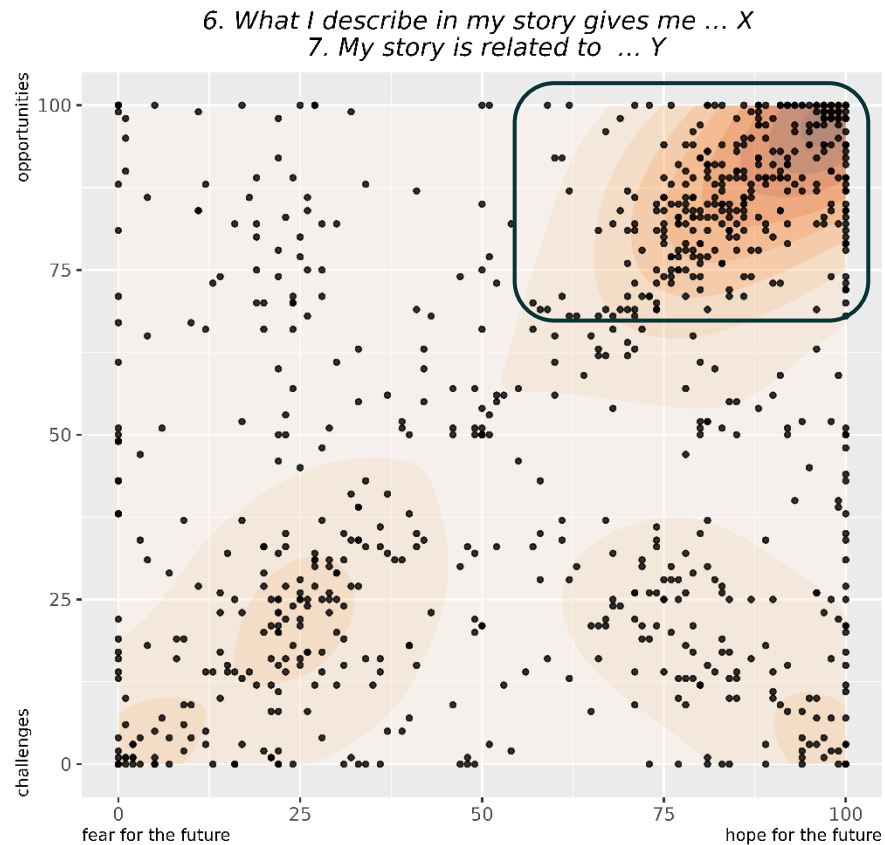


North Sea countries:
Denmark, Belgium, Netherlands,
France



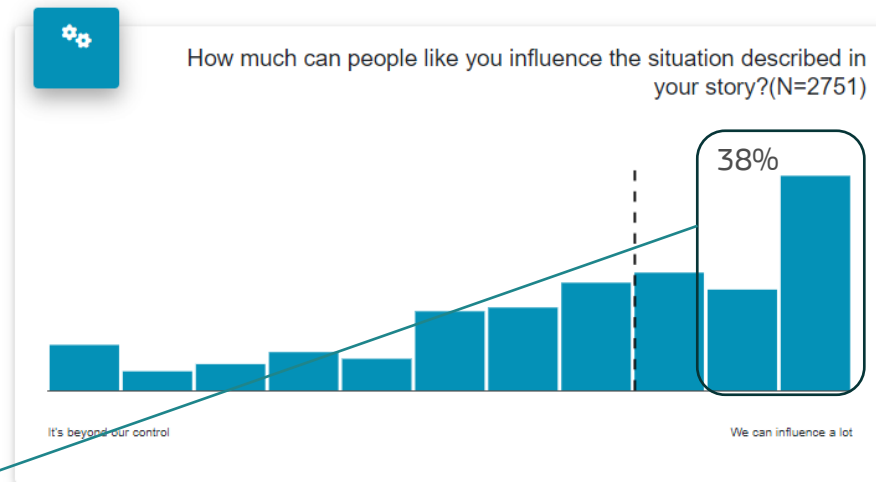
Danube region (without Germany):
Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania,
Slovakia

Where do people see opportunities to act or influence, related to hope for the future?



N = 2751 n = 2751 filter n = 1046 %age = 38%

Diving into the stories that people think they can influence a lot, linked to 'hope for the future' and 'opportunities' on the next slides (per region)...



Where do people see opportunities to act or influence, related to hope for the future?

BALTIC SEA

- Most of the stories talk about drinking more water or having access to clean water for health reasons, or for better concentration at work. In a few stories drinking water in nature (waterfalls, rivers, a well) is mentioned.
- Social activities related to water are present in a lot of stories as well: learning how to swim, being able to swim in a pool, the river or the sea. Or recreation activities: especially fishing
- Only a minority of stories talk about saving water and using it efficiently
 - at home
 - as a professional: installing systems to save water use (drip irrigation, installing water tanks, ...)
 - take community action to protect water sources

Water for drinking

I was on a trip, and I found a waterfall and I drank water from the waterfall, and it tasted the same as normal water, so I went there every day.
(man from Latvia)

Especially the people that live close to fresh water link their stories to 'hope for the future' and see opportunities to act (69% compared to 64% in the overall group from people in countries surrounding the Baltic Sea). Idem for people who live close to an industrial area (36% compared to 29% in the overall group from the Baltic Sea)

Where do people see opportunities to act + hope?

DANUBE REGION

- Especially people from urban areas (81% compared to 71% for the general pattern of people in countries around the Danube river) link their stories to 'hope for the future' and see opportunities to act/influence
- Like the Baltic region, there is a strong focus on drinking water and references to health, but at the same time the (emotional) connection with nature is mentioned more often.
- “Water is life” : a lot of short descriptions about how important water is for the planet and human beings, but less stories about personal experiences - “water is the elixir of life” - “water is the source of life”
- Aspect of water to relax is also quite present, together with swimming and holiday memories near the water
- Only a few stories about changing habits related to water use.

The way of water

When I travel it happens very little that the tap water is drinkable, so I am incredibly happy when I come to Slovakia and I can drink water
(woman from Slovakia)

Saved by water

For a long time, my high blood pressure was life-threatening because I drank very little water. Since I have been drinking dojcenska voda regularly, it has normalised.
(man from Hungary)

Skegness

When I was a kid we always went to the water with the caravan we always felt the best and healthiest there.
(woman from Slovakia)

History without a name

During the complete isolation of Kovid 19, came the realization of how important the little things are- being healthy, your family too, having water and food, being able to get some air in the woods or go to the sea. To feel the air and the water like never before. To learn to value natural resources, to conserve and protect water because it is vital.
(woman from Bulgaria)

Lake Constance my home

Lake Constance gives me warmth, cold, coolness and at the same time simply peace and quiet. It's the place where you can switch off and feel good, Simply water, by the water, in the water and on the water. Life-giver for many things. A drinking area for residents and travellers.
(man from Austria)

Where do people see opportunities to act or influence + hope?

MEDITERRANEAN REGION

- A lot of stories about an emotional response to water: swimming in the sea, the feeling of relaxation, being in the water to recharge energy
- Not surprisingly, quite some stories in the countries around the Mediterranean sea about more efficient use of water. “Water is precious.”
- Also here, stories about drinking water and the connection to health, staying hydrated.
- A few stories about efficient water use for gardening, or in the agricultural sector.

Slightly more men in this group that see opportunities; all the other demographic parameters follow the general pattern for the Mediterranean region.

Water purifier and bread maker

One day I was very disillusioned and sad about my life and the way it was going and I decided to go for a walk on the beach, so wrapped up in my thoughts and in a huge mental mess, I decided to go into the water. This moment was meant to clear my head, but when I got into the water it washed my soul and I felt a peace that made me see things from a different and positive perspective. Then I realised the importance of water in renewing us and giving us a new birth.

(man from Portugal)

My farm

I have a farm, where I grow vegetables, legumes, tomatoes, peppers, etc. For home use, water for irrigation is not essential.

(man from Spain)

Where do people see opportunities to act or influence, related to hope for the future?

NORTH SEA REGION

- The relaxing aspect of overlooking water or swimming comes up in quite a number of stories.
- Secondly, we notice a lot of stories about drinking (more & clean) water for health reasons
- Slightly more references to tap water compared to the other 3 regions. Also efficient water use comes up.

Drinkable at last

I had a water softener installed and I've been able to drink it ever since.

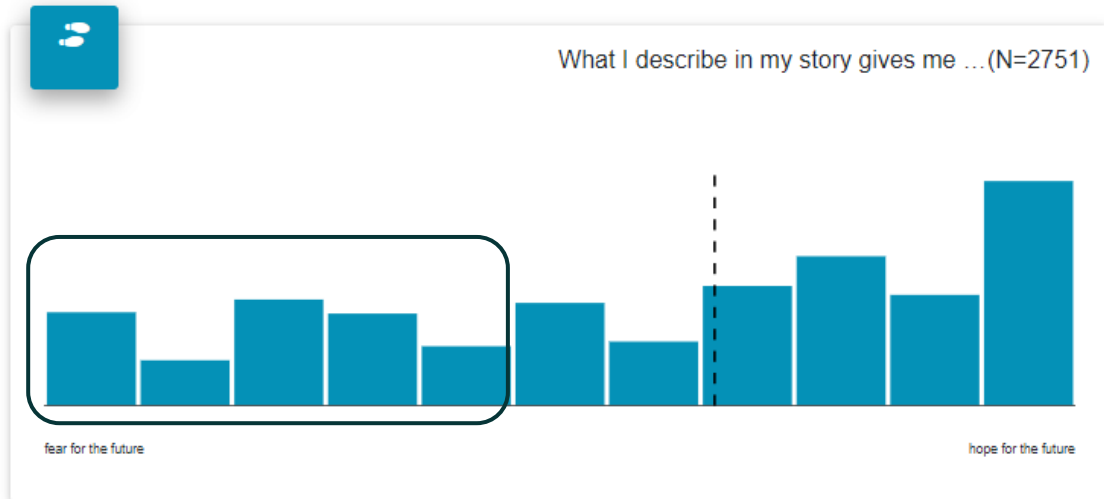
(man from Belgium)

Water is precious

When there are water cuts, I've understood the importance of water because you can't do anything without it: clean yourself, prepare food, hydrate yourself. So I'm more careful with water, I don't run the tap as much. When I do my ablutions for my prayer, I don't run the water as much either.

(woman from France)

Water worries



- Most of these stories are related to **access of water**: it's about fear for water shortages and worries related to periods of drought or heatwaves.
- Strong awareness of our dependency on water
- Pollution of oceans, rivers & lakes also comes up a couple of times, sometimes related to fear or worries about health.
- Lastly, it's the power of water that causes fear (risk of drowning, flooding)

Lives saved - composure lost

I saved a child from drowning in a swimming pool in a hotel near Lake Garda. The pool was full of people. But the boy just went under and nobody noticed anything except me. When I got the boy out of the water he just had the strength to show his parents. I took him to his parents and asked if they could take better care of their child. The mum asked what he had been doing. I told her he had almost drowned. Then she said he hadn't put his water wings on, even though she always told him to. His father wasn't interested in the whole conversation at all. I've never been more bewildered in my life. The parents blamed their failure on a child who was probably less than five years old.

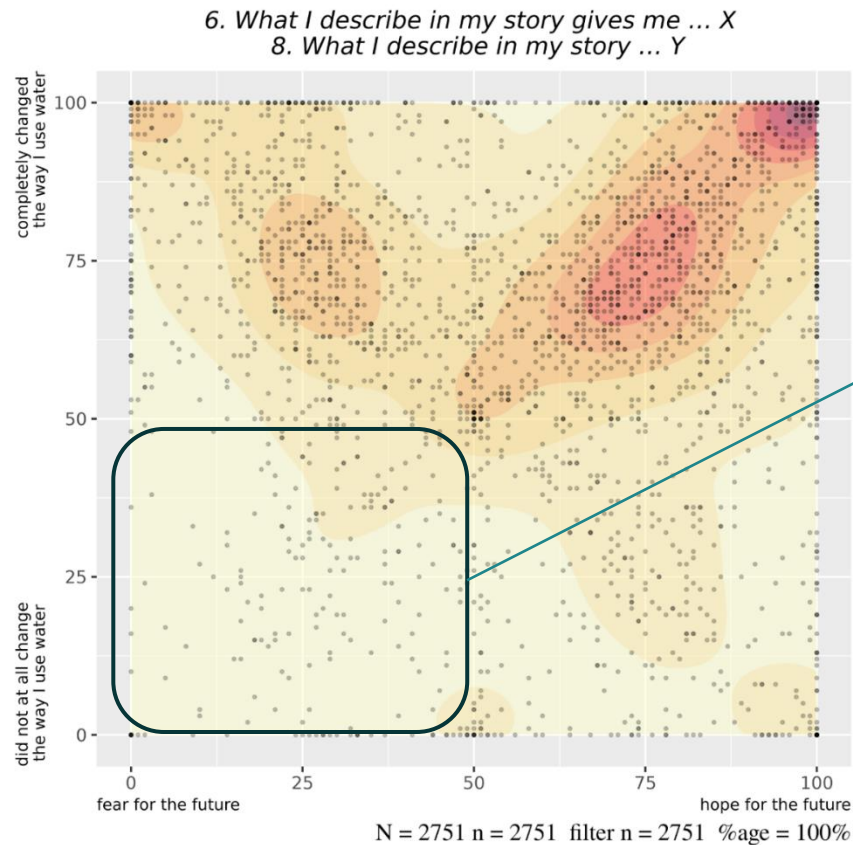
Water worries

Why did people not change the way they use water?

Very few stories actually mention action, but **we do see awareness**. And in some stories people clearly talk about, for example, rationalising water use, but as something they've been doing all their lives (so no *change* in water use).

“Someone else should act”, “Feeling powerless – it’s much bigger than me”: mostly it's about issues that people feel are out of their control, they don't see the connection between big issues and themselves, what they can do individually.

- Ocean/sea pollution
- PFAS
- Climate change > *however a lot less stories about drought & climate change in this set of stories, compared to the set of stories in which people did change the way they use water (see slide 81)*
- Floods or fires



Water worries

Water cuts alone do not make people more aware or change their behaviour. It may lead to a moment of awareness that water is essential to daily life and should not be taken for granted. However, people are used to having water and don't want to compromise on comfort.

Water cuts

It was the period with a lot of problem with water cuts and we left without water for 2 days. It was a difficult period because we couldn't make a shower or wash our clothes.

(woman from Cyprus)

We also find a few stories about the government is not acting (*so I won't act either*) or **frustration about individual efforts vs. bigger players not acting**:

Holidays without water

[...] I've tried even harder to save water, for everyone's sake, but essentially for the sake of the residents, who are here all year round. But it's frustrating to then see the big hotels, developments, etc. with swimming pools full of water, the tennis courts. Because everyone is thinking about profit, about satisfying the customer, which I understand. But if there's no water, the money is useless.

(woman from Portugal)

The problem with water

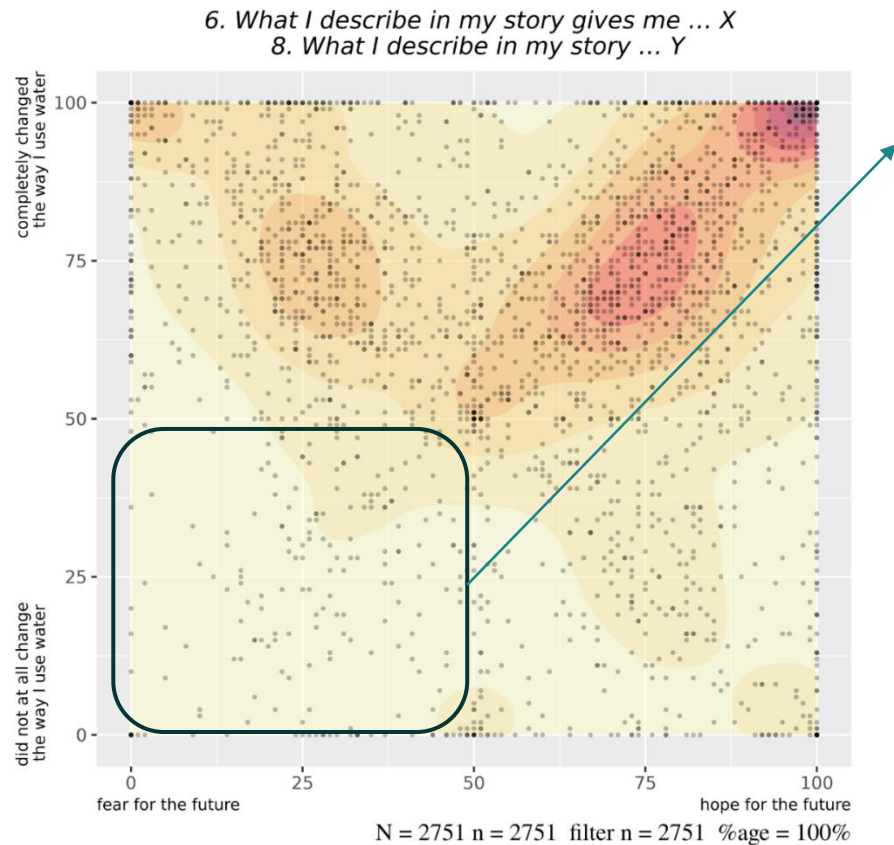
The economic shortage of water is due to a lack of investment in infrastructure or technology to extract water from rivers, aquifers and other water sources, or due to an insufficient human capacity to meet the demand for water.

(woman from Spain)

Slept on the hour

As chairman of our local water company, I have experienced how important our water is and how many people take it for granted. BUT we can't anymore, as the political system has slept on it for too many years and done nothing

(man from Denmark)

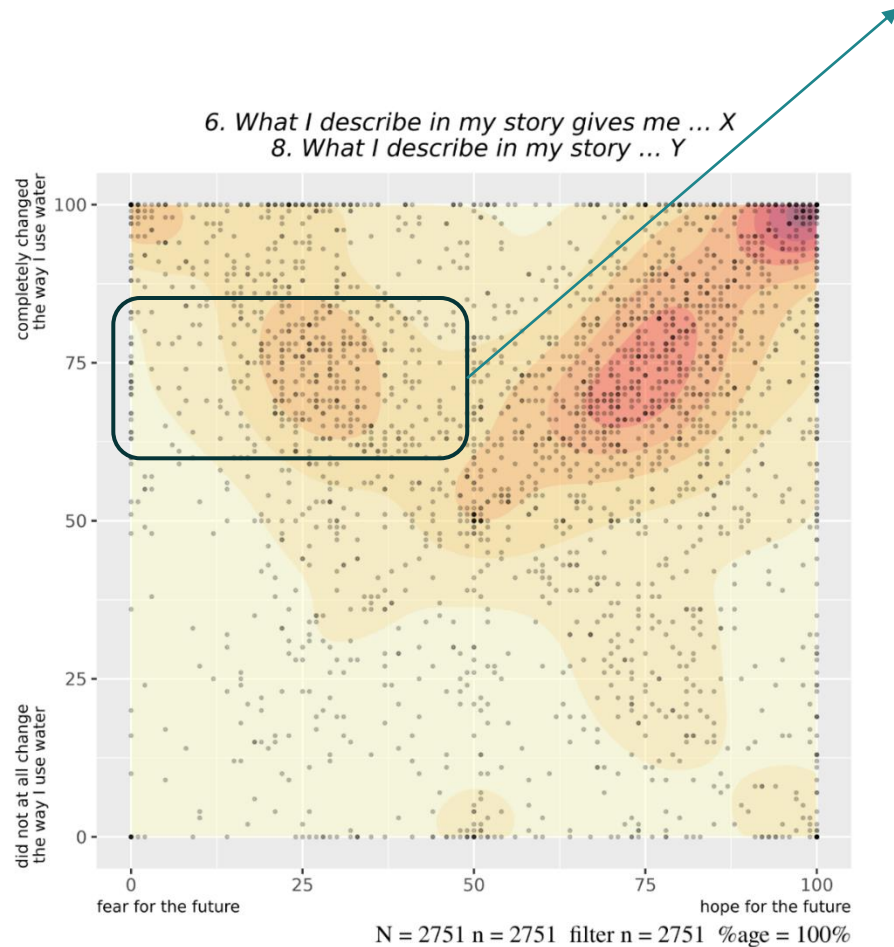


Water worries

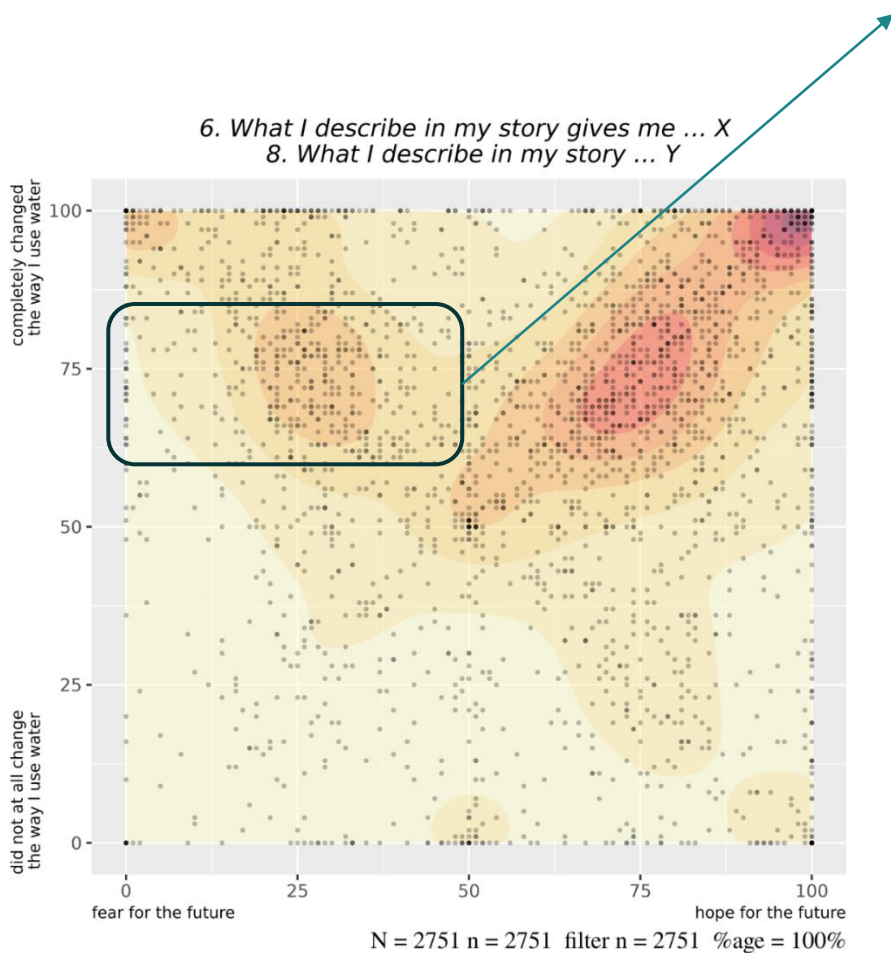
Why did people change the way they use water?

People especially share a lot of experiences that made an **(emotional) impact**

- Most of the stories relate to **experiencing a heatwave or drought due to climate change**, or seeing people in other countries struggling for water. Very few stories talk about drinking water *only*, but they look at the issue in a **more holistic way** (reference to nature). People act by
 - stocking water, collecting rainwater
 - rationalising their water use
 - buying bottled water
- The issue of drinking water comes up, particularly in stories about people who go hiking and do not have immediate access to drinking water (**fear of dehydration**).
- A minority of stories talks about seeing rubbish and plastic pollution of oceans, rivers and lakes.



Water worries



Water is life

The dry summers of the last few years scare me. Trees are drying out. Cereals in the fields are not producing any yields. For the first time in my life I realise how important water is for our lives. Since then I can't stand it when a tap drips, a faulty toilet flush runs uninterrupted or water is wasted anywhere.

(woman from Germany)

Drought

I am Sicilian and have long feared drought

Water waste

A specific memento may be the time when a relative of mine (cousin) was investigating the use and wastage of drinking water for his work, the result of his research that he decided to share with me made me think, in fact more drinking water is wasted annually on daily chores or in household appliances than actually used for human needs. This left me thinking about how much of what everyone does leads to a great waste of water and what I could do to change.

(woman from Italy)

Bottled water in Finland

In my own life, I have realised that market forces have had a surprisingly big influence on me. Even though Finland's tap water is very clean, I have often bought expensive bottled water from the shops. It's absurd.

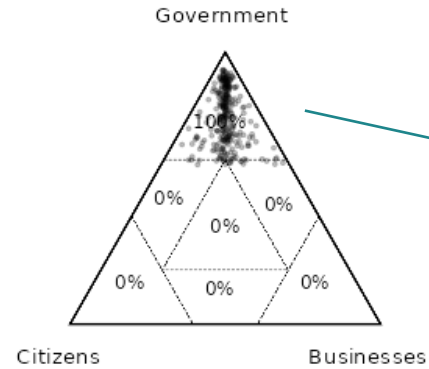
Thirsty

It was very hot and I didn't have any mineral water with me, it was a dream to be able to drink Viennese water from the tap, which isn't possible everywhere.

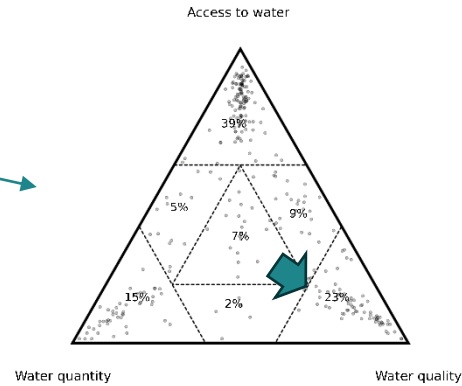
(woman from Austria)

Influence of governments

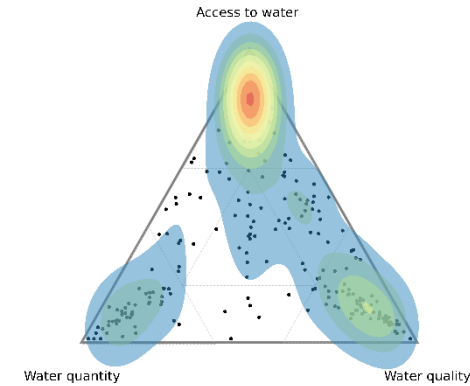
13. Who has most influence on the situation you described in your story?



14. What has most influence on the situation you described in your story?



14. What has most influence on the situation you described in your story?

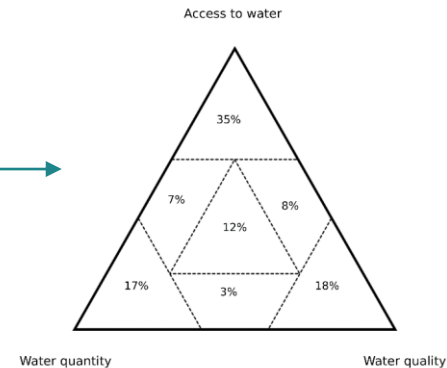


The group of people who think their experiences are particularly influenced by the government (compared to citizens and businesses) associate their stories especially with access to water, but also more strongly with water quality compared to the general pattern.

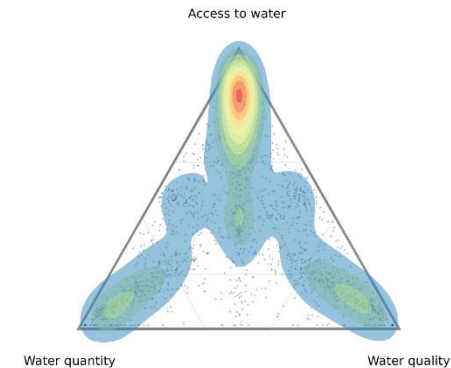
Except in the Mediterranean region (much stronger association of these experiences with access to water).

General pattern, all stories

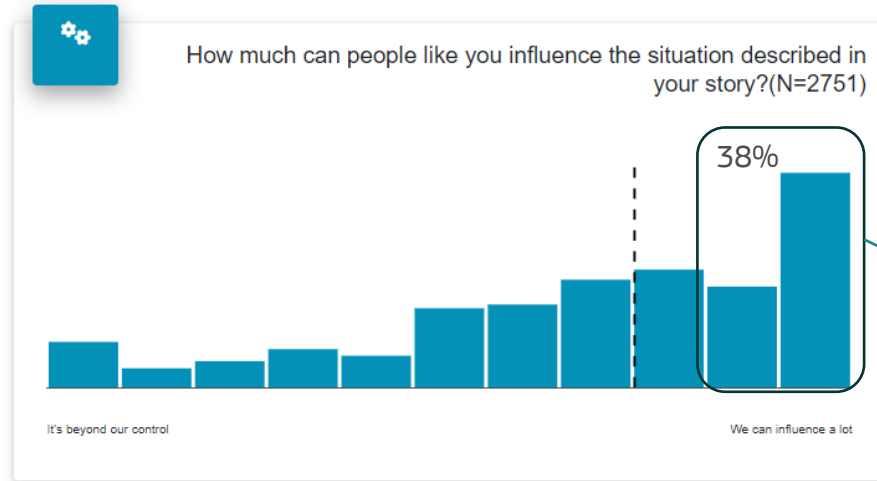
14. What has most influence on the situation you described in your story?



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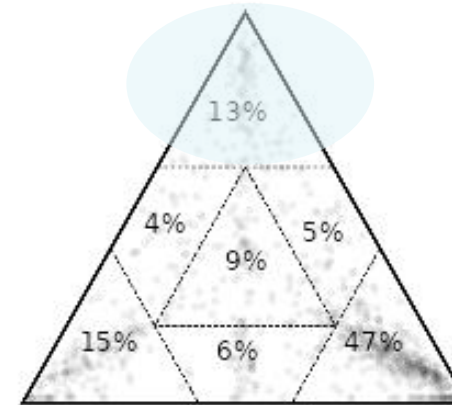
Where do people see possibilities to co-influence?



Diving into the stories that people think they can influence a lot, linked to policies, laws and regulations on the next slides...

12. What is important in your story?

Policies, laws and regulations



Social norms

Personal beliefs

Where do people see possibilities to co-influence?

“Continuously have access to water”

- Most of the stories refer to drinking water, and (temporarily) experiencing not having access to (clean) water from the tap or simply imagining water scarcity.
- The second most important topic refers to ground water resources: experiencing ground water levels being low, or seeing river basins drying up (incl. for use in agriculture)
- Water infrastructure (dykes etc.) or general water management is mentioned not so often, only by the professionals/stakeholders.

Clean water

I work with families that don't have access to running water
(woman from Ireland)

Reduce consumption

Climate change and its impact on water scares me a lot. My friend works outside the country and had to buy water at very expensive prices because the water sources were almost exhausted. Therefore, I felt that we need to take strict measures to find renewable water sources.

(woman from Germany)

Water amongst fires

A couple of years ago the summer was hot and the ground water used to drinking were dangerously low. At the same time, there was big forest fires around the country in Sweden and new fires started daily. I spent some weeks in the country house, surrounded by ocean on three sides. I realized that the ocean itself both saved us from fires elsewhere but also could cut us short if we had to escape fire from the landslide behind us. At that same time I collected drinking water in bottles in case of any fire damaging the electricity line and thus preventing us from using the electrified pump from the well. That water, both for drinking and the ocean, was a key to survival even in this modern society.

(woman from Sweden)

Where do people see possibilities to co-influence?

“Keeping our water safe and clean”

People especially refer again to drinking water, from the tap and in public areas. But also swimming in pools and rivers is again mentioned quite a lot in the stories

Sea water pollution, protecting sea animals, protecting marine ecosystems and coastal areas (noise, pollution, general landscape ...) is a topic that is also very present in the stories.

The water bill or water taxes are only mentioned in one story, although it comes up a few more times in the section where people could leave their ideas for the future.

I am water

In fact, in my childhood home we always had water from the spring that flowed continuously, and the feeling of going to the fountain to drink by bending your head and regenerating yourself, already explains my relationship and the importance I give to water

(man from Belgium)

Water Tax

A moment I remember clearly is when the Irish Government introduced a water tax and that resulted in mass protests around Ireland.

(man from rural area in Ireland, no permission to share publicly)

Insight 7

Concerns and motivators change depending on the surroundings and contexts. It is prominent for cross-border issues.

Behavioural patterns in the stories about **DRINKING WATER**

Analysis based on sample

Appreciation and gratitude (most prominent)

- Realizing the importance of water for survival and expressing gratitude for access to it.
- Taking water for granted until its availability is disrupted, leading to a newfound appreciation.
- Recognizing water's essential role in maintaining health and cleanliness.
- Express concern about its scarcity and unequal access globally.

Conservation and protection

- Making conscious efforts to reduce water usage and reuse water due to previous experiences with water scarcity.
- Avoiding pollution and maintaining the purity of natural water sources.

Reaction to not having quality drinking water available

- Purchasing bottled water
- Valuing the taste and convenience of tap water in specific contexts.
- Using jerry cans etc. for storage and transportation of drinking water.

35-40 stories talk about bottled water

Insight 7

Concerns and motivators change depending on the surroundings and contexts. It is prominent for cross-border issues.

Behavioural patterns in the stories about **FRESHWATER**

Conservation and taking responsibility (most prominent)

- Mindfulness in reducing water usage and reusing water.
- Recognizing the importance of clean and accessible water, and taking measures to conserve it.

Emotional and nostalgic connection (also prominent)

- Positive emotional response and (childhood) nostalgia towards water bodies.
- Realizing the importance and fragility of water.
- Finding peace and calmness in the presence of water.

Reaction to the power of water

- Fear of the vastness and power of water.
- Overcoming fear through learning how to swim

Analysis based on sample

Leisure and enjoyment

- Swimming
- Awareness of its importance in nature and taking part in recreational activities (fishing etc.)
- Viewing water as a source of relaxation and enjoyment, particularly during holidays and leisure time.

Insight 7

Concerns and motivators change depending on the surroundings and contexts. It is prominent for cross-border issues.

Behavioural patterns in the stories about [SEA WATER](#)

Appreciation and (positive) emotional connection (most prominent)

- A deep appreciation and recognition of the ocean's vital importance for life, and acting upon it
- Feelings of nostalgia, peace, tranquility, and happiness.
- Recreational activities and family bonding. Activities such as swimming, playing on the beach, and engaging in water sport, adventure

Conservation and protection

- Avoiding pollution and maintaining the purity of natural water sources.
- Individuals advocating for the preservation and protection of the ocean/sea and its animals.

Analysis based on sample

Reaction to the power of water

- recognition of the ocean's vastness and potential danger.
- Learning how to swim

Healing

- The ocean/sea is recognised for its healing properties, both physical and mental.

Type of water

- About 45-50% of total number of stories entirely or partially talk about or refer to drinking water

Austria, Croatia, Latvia, and Sweden have the highest percentage of experiences about drinking water, whereas Greece and Spain are at the other end.

- About 10-15% of the total number of stories mention the sea or the ocean

People from Greece and Italy share most stories related to the sea. Luxemburg, Romania and Estonia the least. Also quite some people from Germany refer to the sea, but – given Germany's geography- these are mostly stories from holidays in other countries.

- About 10 % of the total number of stories mentions rivers, lakes or other freshwater bodies

Finland and Austria rank the highest. People from Slovenia and Poland also refer to it above average. Malta, Cyprus and Denmark are at the other end.

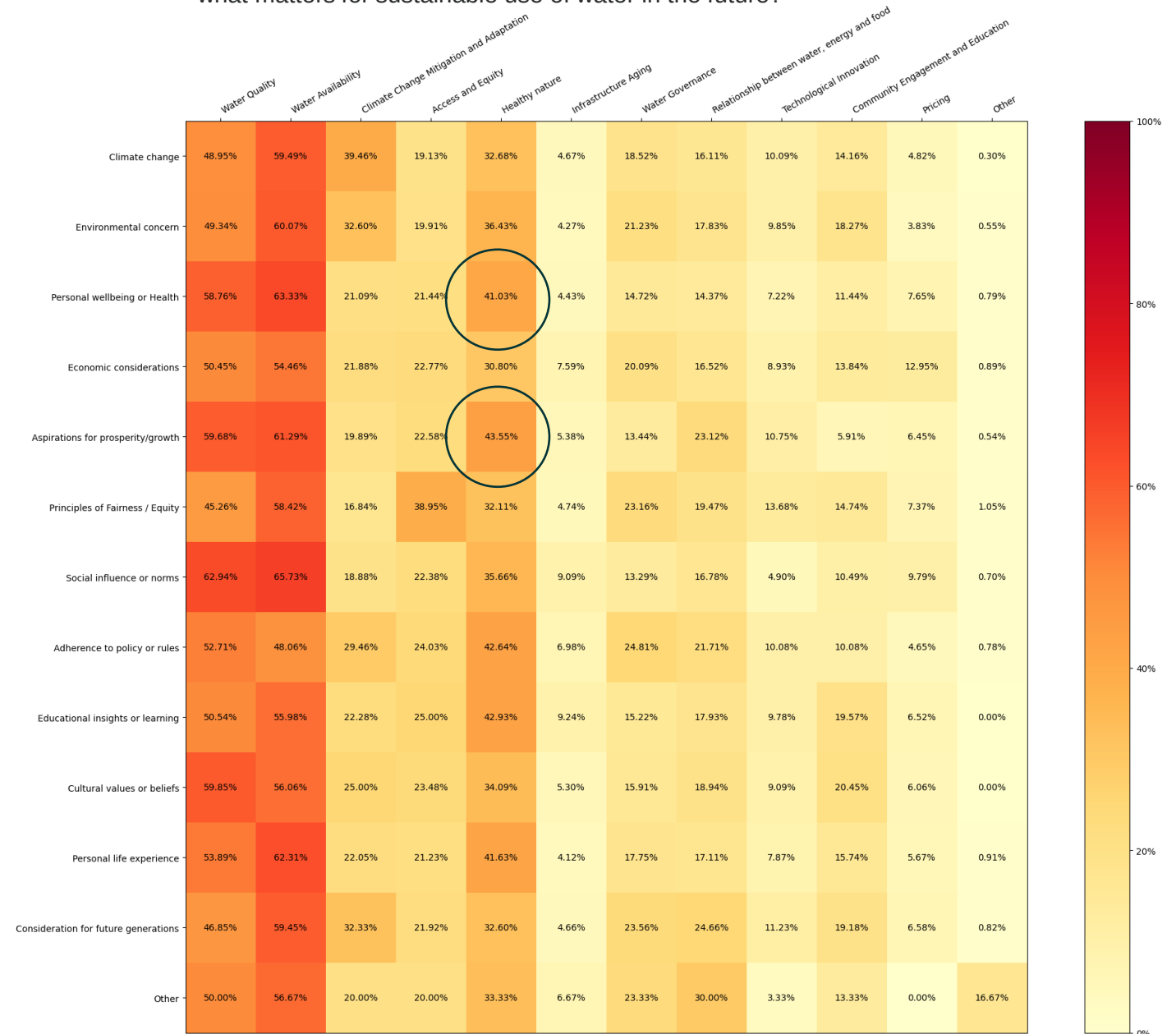
Entry points for the future?

41% of group of people that shared a story in which they think their experience is shaped by personal health and wellbeing or personal life experiences, thinks that 'healthy nature' is important when it comes to a sustainable use of water in the future. Idem for 43% of the people shared stories that they think their experience is shaped by aspirations for prosperity.

> Healthy nature as entry point instead of climate change for this group?

The aspects that most prominently shaped my perceptions, thinking and/or actions in relation to water in my story...

Looking into the future beyond your story, in your view, what matters for sustainable use of water in the future?



Adaptation strategies related to drought

- Diving into the stories with the word « drought » mentioned in it.
- (consent to share = not checked for this part)

Strategy 1: conserving water on a personal level, in the household

- Most stories in which we find hints to strategies on how to deal with periods of droughts, talk about using less water in their households, like taking shorter showers and not washing the car with drinking water.

“It was made very clear to me as a child, not to waste water if not necessary. Max 5 minutes shower, which I still adapt to myself. Also because of the droughts in summer, it would be a shame that agriculture would have no water left to water their land. But then once a week I do pamper myself by taking a bath. But I do not shower daily. I often wash myself at the sink.”

“Last summer when the weather was hot and there were a lot of droughts and the water level was low. Then I thought mainly about the animals that might run out of water. Think and do more about water conservation, shower less and shorter. Reuse water!”

Strategy 2: storing and using rainwater where possible

- Storing and reusing rainwater is mentioned in several stories.

[...] we were looking for a stimulating approach that encourages residents to increase rainwater collection and infiltration, softening and greening on their own property [...]

[...] There were news reports of dry trees, farmers complaining about crop problems and various rivers and lakes that had significantly reduced water. My perception was swayed in this respect: that I had started conserving water and had also purchased containers to store rainwater. We grow vegetables, so we use water that splashes when it rains. Given the cost and the threat of water shortages, this was a good solution to mitigate these impacts.

[...] So I save water by recycling it: all water has 2 uses: shower, washing machine for the WC, kitchen water for the garden, rainwater for the garden and the trees. With 55m² of vegetable garden and 25 trees planted (6 of which died as a result of the drought), I only consume 24m³ of water a year, so that's 2m³ a month.

Strategy 3: involving the community

- Realising that water conservation efforts work better when the community is involved (incl. educating people who are unaware of the effort involved in supplying clean drinking water.). A few stories talk about this.

[...] By organising a Living Lab, they want to make the inhabitants embrace water again as a precious commodity and encourage them to take action. Various strategies were tested: water talks, water deals, water parade... As a result, 8 residents in Waterschei ended up providing a total of 11 extra rain barrels and 2 residents had their drainpipe infiltrated in their garden. [...]

[...] Determined to save his garden, Émile began to collect rainwater and reuse domestic water. He taught his neighbours how to save water and share this precious resource. Together, they built a rainwater harvesting system for the village. This experience had a profound effect on Émile. He realised that every drop of water was precious and that responsible water management was essential for the future. He became a fervent advocate of water conservation, influencing not only his own actions but also those of his community.

In a hot summer, I volunteered in Marsaxlokk to install water-saving systems. Seeing families struggle with limited water showed me its true value and scarcity during droughts. This experience changed how I use water daily and motivated me to promote water conservation. I became more aware of the environmental challenges and the importance of preserving water for community well-being.

Strategy 4: governments regulate water use

- We find only a few stories in which governments try to regulate the use of water. They also initiate and stimulate the community and education efforts mentioned earlier.

In the summer of 2023, there was a water shortage in Denmark, so grass and gardens could not be watered, which quickly became very apparent in Danish gardens, including our own. That's when I really realised how much water means to our grass and plants.

[...] With the Waterrijk Waterschei project, the city of Genk, together with residents of the Waterschei district, wants to work on solutions to these problems. We are creating more space for water in the district, on the one hand by softening and on the other by disconnecting rainwater from the sewerage system. [...] For Flanders too, it is an interesting experiment for future water/drought policy. Therefore, the project is subsidised by the Flemish Environment Agency and Department of the Environment as a pilot project.

Longer stories to illustrate certain aspects

A Child's Awakening to the Power of Water

One day I approached the river bank. I dipped my fingers in the water and felt its cool embrace on my skin. But instead of withdrawing my hand in joy, I recoiled in horror from the dirt clinging to my fingertips. At that moment, I realized the great importance of water in my life. Water is not only a resource for quenching thirst or facilitating daily tasks; water is the essence of life itself. It preserves the park's lush greenery, provides habitat for countless creatures, and offers solace to weary souls seeking refuge from the urban jungle. From that day on, I became a champion for clean water. I organized community cleanup efforts, lobbied local governments for stricter environmental regulations, and educated my peers on the importance of keeping water clean. My actions inspired others to join the cause and started a city-wide environmental movement.

The once-neglected river began to thrive again. Fish returned to its waters, birds sang in the trees, and families flocked to the banks of the river to enjoy picnics and games.

(woman from Slovenia)

Water only

I don't think I can speak of just one moment or one experience related to the importance of water in my life! I grew up near a small running water, a place where I would spend my hot summer days relaxing and cooling off, making little pools to bathe and play in. In winter, there was a mini ice rink right next to my house, not to mention sled races on the icy creek trail, the boys' favorite race, with icy waterfalls to jump over and far superior speed to sledding on snow! Relaxation, after a day of playing and running, was still on the water's edge at sunset, accompanied by the sweet, gentle murmur of the creek. From an existential point of view, from simply hydrating the body, to when food doesn't want to slide down your throat and you feel like you're suffocating, it's all about the water! I know, you'll say a beer works better, but it's still water at its core, without getting into other polemics raised by alcohol consumption! It is water that brings joy to my children's faces when they hear the word POOL, it is water that accompanies us everywhere on our life's journey, but I fear it will also be the source of bitter struggles for survival in the future.

(man from Romania)

The importance of water supply and wastewater treatment

As a young graduate, I met some very proud waterworks people at small waterworks who were beaming with pride at the meaningful work they were doing to ensure drinking water for their citizens. It made a big impression on me. Likewise, meeting people who worked with wastewater. I knew many people in cultural life who worked with aesthetic cultural work, such as organists or other classical musicians, but here this was about someone doing something very basic: unaesthetic cultural work. The prerequisite for someone to rise above the humdrum of everyday life and do aesthetic work

(woman from Denmark, stakeholder)

Water is Sown

I live in the countryside. When I was little and we used to go to the mountains, I used to see the water running through the “Regueras” there and the meadows where the goats and cows grazed were green. We used to stop there in the heat. It was cool and humid. All that was abandoned, there were no more goatherds or goats, no more cowboys or cows. We would go up to the meadows and they were dry. All that water planting, abandoned. Those springs no longer gave water. Dry springs. A few years ago, thanks to the Irrigation Association and volunteers, these mountain springs are being recovered. A great work is being done and a great job, because we have to recover everything that our ancestors did. A common good that we must not lose.

(woman from Spain, stakeholder)

Holidays without water

I've always been aware of the importance of water. That without it, we can't live. I draw attention to myself when I see someone wasting water. But I turned on the tap and it came out every day, whenever I needed it. When I went on holiday to the Algarve a few years ago, they said there was a water shortage, as recently happened. When I arrived at the flat I'd rented, there were several papers stuck up around the house asking people to save water. On each of them were pictures of wasted water. And in red letters, "Save water", please. That moment made me think even more about the importance of water and how much we need it in our lives. I've tried even harder to save water, for everyone's sake, but essentially for the sake of the residents, who are here all year round. But it's frustrating to then see the big hotels, developments, etc. with swimming pools full of water, the tennis courts. Because everyone is thinking about profit, about satisfying the customer, which I understand. But if there's no water, the money is useless.

(woman from Portugal)

Lake drying

I own a (summer) house with a garden on a lake. This lake dried up last year. 20 to 30 tonnes of fish died. The idyllic steppe lake was suddenly gone, no more beautiful sunsets, no more walks on the beach. There was no bird life, which had previously been so diverse. The lake bed began to overgrow, to become overgrown. Not a pretty sight. The cause was the drought and the fall in the groundwater level, accelerated by excessive field irrigation in agriculture. The failure of the authorities accelerated the process. The result was unspeakable sadness because our beloved lake no longer existed.

(man from Austria)

Water culture

In the summer I went on the water with some friends from university. We Czech students were fine with the water from the river, but the foreign students from North America were afraid of the water. The reason? A large number of water sources in their country are outright faulty and people don't use them. I thought it was a shame, sad.

(woman from Czechia)

Getting in touch with the EU

In person

All over the European Union there are hundreds of Europe Direct centres. You can find the address of the centre nearest you online (european-union.europa.eu/contact-eu/meet-us_en).

On the phone or in writing

Europe Direct is a service that answers your questions about the European Union. You can contact this service:

- by freephone: 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11 (certain operators may charge for these calls),
- at the following standard number: +32 22999696,
- via the following form: european-union.europa.eu/contact-eu/write-us_en.

Finding information about the EU

Online

Information about the European Union in all the official languages of the EU is available on the Europa website (european-union.europa.eu).

EU publications

You can view or order EU publications at op.europa.eu/en/publications. Multiple copies of free publications can be obtained by contacting Europe Direct or your local documentation centre (european-union.europa.eu/contact-eu/meet-us_en).

EU law and related documents

For access to legal information from the EU, including all EU law since 1951 in all the official language versions, go to EUR-Lex (eur-lex.europa.eu).

EU open data

The portal data.europa.eu provides access to open datasets from the EU institutions, bodies and agencies. These can be downloaded and reused for free, for both commercial and non-commercial purposes. The portal also provides access to a wealth of datasets from European countries.

Science for policy

The Joint Research Centre (JRC) provides independent, evidence-based knowledge and science, supporting EU policies to positively impact society



EU Science Hub

[Joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu](https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu)