



Master in

Sustainable Water and Land Management in Agricultural Ecosystems

Academic Year 2026 - 2027

Description

The Master in **Sustainable Water and Land Management in Agricultural Ecosystems** aims at preparing a new generation towards professional and academic careers, enabling their effective contribution to the sustainable management of water and land resources in agriculture, and to the socio-economic development thereof, in view of important challenges that include water scarcity, land degradation, demographic pressures, and climate change. A major focus is on the increase of cross-sectoral coherence between Sustainable Development Goals, and the application of modern technologies and tools that integrate agronomic, engineering, environmental and socio-economic aspects of water and land management in agriculture.

Students follow theoretical and practical sessions that aim at framing improved management of water and land resources, at increasing food production using less water, and reversing land degradation. The programme presents the basic principles, and the latest scientific and technological achievements in irrigation systems at farm and large-scale level, taking into consideration the application of innovative “green” management solutions.

At the end of the programme, students will acquire the skills to apply integrated approaches of water and land management for sustainable agriculture and food systems, under significant challenges of climate change, resource scarcity, societal changes, and food insecurity. Specifically, they will acquire the following competencies:

- management of water resources in agriculture with a view to land conservation and water use efficiency increase in Mediterranean agroecosystems;
- management of a range of alternative water resources including saline and reclaimed water, and water harvesting systems for irrigation purposes;
- planning and evaluation of irrigation projects, at farm and large-scale level to optimize water/land/nutrient use, considering societal/institutional aspects and economic criteria;
- knowledge of the latest technologies and tools for a sustainable management of water resources at different scales and in different agroecosystems.

The program is organized in 9 Units, awarding 60 credits in total (see details in the table below). The Starting Unit is implemented in distance learning modality and doesn't award credits.

Units	Credits	Calendar
Introductory Unit - Foundations of Sustainable Irrigation and Water Management	0	01 – 23/10/2026
Unit 1 - Water dynamics and land management strategies: a comprehensive approach	6	02/11 – 20/11/2026
Unit 2 – Integrated soil physics and pedology for sustainable irrigation management	6	23/11 – 11/12/2026
Unit 3 - Advanced Irrigation Water Management: Principles, Practices and Tools	6	14/12/2026 – 15/01/2027
Unit 4 - Modern Irrigation Infrastructure: Planning, Design, and Management	6	18/01 – 05/02/2027
Unit 5 - Harnessing Geomatics for Natural Resource Management in Agriculture	6	08/02 – 26/02/2027
Unit 6 - Reimagining Irrigation: Sustainable Use of Alternative Water Resources	6	01/03 – 19/03/2027
Unit 7 - Economic Principles of Irrigated Agriculture and Water Management	6	22/03 – 09/04/2027
Unit 8 - Eco-Environmental Evaluation in Irrigation: Governance and Sustainability	6	12/04 – 30/04/2027
Unit 9 - Holistic Design and Management of Irrigation Projects	12	03/05 – 04/06/2027

INTRODUCTORY UNIT – FOUNDATIONS OF SUSTAINABLE IRRIGATION AND WATER MANAGEMENT

A series of webinars reflect the comprehensive nature of the master's program, covering technological, environmental and economic aspects of sustainable water management.

WEBINAR I: Overview of Sustainable Water Management Principles and Practices

- This webinar provides a broad introduction to the principles, practices, and importance of sustainable water management in agriculture, setting the stage for the detailed units to follow.

WEBINAR II: Innovative Technologies and Economic Approaches in Irrigated Agriculture

- This webinar focuses on cutting-edge technologies, smart tools, and economic principles that are transforming irrigation practices and resource management in modern agriculture.

WEBINAR III: Environmental System Analysis

- The seminar introduces core principles of systems analysis and explores environmental assessment tools to evaluate sustainability and guide strategic decision-making.

UNIT 1 – WATER DYNAMICS AND LAND MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES: A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

The unit explores the key challenges affecting land and water resources in agricultural systems, with a focus on sustainable management under Mediterranean and comparable environmental conditions. It provides a conceptual and applied understanding of surface hydrology and groundwater resource management, examining how these processes influence water availability, allocation, and resilience in farming landscapes. Building on this hydrological foundation, the unit introduces strategies, tools, and assessment approaches for sustainable land management, highlighting integrated methods that support long-term productivity, reduce degradation risks, and enhance the sustainability of agricultural systems.

AIMS

The main objective of the Unit is to increase the knowledge base of students on:

- soil, land, and water resources and their primary role in biomass production including food and ecosystem services;
- land degradation and desertification processes and the best management practices to mitigate their negative impacts.

The Unit will provide basic knowledge on the following:

- Groundwater hydrological processes and their interaction with agronomic practices
- Deepen into practices, approaches and tools for integrated surface and groundwater management
- WOCAT¹ methodology for sustainable land and water management
- Out-scaling and upscaling the best management practices

LEARNING OUTCOMES

At the end of the Unit, students will acquire:

- Comprehensive knowledge on characteristics and diversity of land and water resources with major focus on the Mediterranean region;
- Basic concepts of integrated natural resources management including both bio-physical and socio-economic indicators;
- Overwhelming experience to assess land degradation process in a landscape context;
- Principles of implementing sustainable land and water management and its out-scaling;
- Knowledge on factors that govern land and water management in an ecosystem-based approach and with multi-stakeholder involvement;
- Full understanding of surface and groundwater management and hydrological processes.

¹ *World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies (WOCAT)* is a network of Sustainable Land Management (SLM) specialists from all over the world.

UNIT 2 – INTEGRATED SOIL PHYSICS AND PEDOLOGY FOR SUSTAINABLE IRRIGATION MANAGEMENT

This Unit introduces the fundamental principles of pedology and soil management, covering soil classification, soil survey techniques, and the interpretation of key pedological features for agricultural applications. Through theoretical lectures and practical field and laboratory activities, students develop the skills needed to characterize soil physical and hydro-pedological properties, with particular attention to water and solute movement in the soil profile. The Unit also examines the functioning of the soil–plant–atmosphere continuum, integrating agronomic and hydrological concepts to support sustainable soil and water management in agricultural systems.

AIMS

Providing theoretical knowledge and explaining basic and advanced concepts and relations on the topics of interest to practical application of sustainable resources management. Hence, the Unit focuses on:

- Soil genesis
- Soil survey
- Soil classification systems
- Geo-referenced soil information systems
- understanding soil physical properties and processes;
- collecting and interpreting agro-meteorological data;
- investigating complex interactions of the Soil-Plant-Atmosphere Continuum;

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students enhance their theoretical understanding of the above topics and acquire practical skills and capacity to use:

- field and laboratory equipment/procedures for acquisition/analysis of soil samples, agro-meteorological data, and crop physiological status/parameters;
- knowledge factors that govern water and solute movements in the soil;
- Full understanding of Soil-plant-atmosphere continuum

UNIT 3 – ADVANCED IRRIGATION WATER MANAGEMENT: PRINCIPLES, PRACTICES AND TOOLS

This Unit addresses the issues related to the management of irrigation water. In particular, through theoretical and practical sessions, this Unit provides the basic and advanced knowledge to elaborate agro-meteorological data, optimize irrigation scheduling and model crop growth for a sustainable on-farm irrigation management.

A better management of water in irrigated agriculture it is necessary to enhance crop production and preserve soil and water quality. Irrigation management focuses in the adoption of practices that enhance the efficient use of water, the response of crops to water, the scheduling of irrigation. In addition, the technologies and tools for supporting irrigated agriculture at farm level can enhance the potential for planning and management of the water resources.

AIMS

- estimating crop water requirements and crop response to water;
- optimization of irrigation scheduling;
- Resource use efficiency and crop water productivity;
- Crop growth modelling;
- Smart on-farm irrigation management practices and tools.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- irrigation-scheduling tools based on the soil water balance under different environmental conditions, management limitations and irrigation methods;
- crop growth modeling to simulate development, growth, and yield as a function of the soil-plant-atmosphere dynamics and management practices;
- a practical smart irrigation tool (app) for on-farm irrigation management.

UNIT 4 - MODERN IRRIGATION INFRASTRUCTURE: PLANNING, DESIGN, AND MANAGEMENT

The scientific understanding combined with new technology leads to better development, maintenance, and management of durable and efficient delivery systems that convey irrigation water from its source to the land and provide reliable services to users. This Unit explores an integrated approach that fosters an efficient management of water in agriculture, and a resilient design of irrigation systems, in a performance-oriented perspective. Students learn about advances, technologies, and innovations in farm irrigation technologies, multi-objective planning, design, and management of large-scale irrigation systems, use of renewable energy in water systems, and management practices and approaches towards a sustainable water management in agricultural environments. They also acquire knowledge on how a system would react to fluctuations of its input (supply and/or demand), and thus an understanding, through a problem-solving approach, of the location of bottlenecks, of the importance of failures and, consequently, of actions to be built in. This curriculum is built on the key supporting sciences of hydraulics, soil and plant science, and economics.

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- developing the theoretical, conceptual, and practical knowledge about the processes that contribute to water sustainability and resilience;
- providing the general overview and systems level knowledge on the technical and engineering aspects of irrigation water equipment and infrastructure;
- familiarizing students with the latest insights, concepts, and theories of irrigation technologies for sustainable development;
- planning, designing, operating, maintaining, controlling, and managing water resources and irrigation-related infrastructure, emphasizing the modernization of irrigation.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

On conclusion of the Unit, the student:

- acquires knowledge on water management in agricultural settings;
- fully understands the delivery processes, structural components, function and performance of irrigation systems and the interaction of scales;
- masters different types of irrigation systems, techniques, and technologies, and is able to use the most appropriate, under different conditions;
- builds technical background for system level planning, operation, maintenance, control, and management, in a water-energy nexus perspective.

UNIT 5 – HARNESSING GEOMATICS FOR NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN AGRICULTURE

Nowadays, the sustainable planning and management of agriculture rely a lot on a range of SMART tools that make possible the fast collection and analysis of large geo-spatial data. Remote sensing, Geographic Information Systems and Global Position Systems, are commonly applied to a variety of fields that include farming systems analysis, water and irrigation management and are used for the acquisition, management, processing, analysis and display of spatial data and information.

The use of these technologies requires the access to software (open licenses) and devices, often combined and integrated.

AIMS

The main objective of the Unit is to present how SMART tools may help support decisions in agriculture towards a sustainable management of natural resources, using modern approaches and tools available in geomatic, geoscientific and computer science environments.

In particular, the Unit provides basic knowledge for the use and applications of the following technologies:

- Remote sensing;
- Geographic Information System;
- Cartography and Geographic Positioning System.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

At the end of the Unit, students will acquire:

- basic concepts, principles, methods, and practical applications of the Geographic Information System (GIS), Cartography and Geographic Positioning System (GPS);
- fundamental concepts of remote sensing for the management and sustainability of the territory, the agricultural system, and the water resources.

UNIT 6 – REIMAGINING IRRIGATION: SUSTAINABLE USE OF ALTERNATIVE WATER RESOURCES

Pressures from population growth and climate change have widened the gap between the availability and the demand for water in agriculture, reaching unsustainable levels in some regions, especially in the Mediterranean . Thus, it is imperative to re-orientate the best water management practices in agriculture towards Alternative Water Resources (AWR) use, such as drainage water, treated wastewater, and desalinated water with varying levels of treatment. It has been argued that the safe use of AWRs in irrigated agriculture provides numerous socio-economic benefits. However, processes in water treatment are complex and capital-intensive and produce additional environmental and economic impacts for ensuring appropriate water quality.

This Unit offers a holistic approach towards AWR management and practices in agriculture as a sustainable, safe, innovative, and cost-effective way of improving community access to water in water-scarce areas. This contributes to climate change adaptation and preserves soil and crop quality, ensuring crop productivity to match current population growth. The major focus is on:

- the treatments' methods and processes;
- the safe reuse of low-quality waters;
- salinity control and impact on soils and crops;
- drainage systems design and management;
- water quality monitoring for safe supply.

AIMS

Explaining the main techniques, strategies, technologies, and assessment tools related to the use of AWR in agriculture.

- examining the role of AWR as a potential contributor to water and food security,
- reviewing agricultural practices adoption with alternative sources of water in supporting farming sustainability,
- proposing irrigation and agriculture management practices and monitoring techniques to control deep percolation fluxes and limit soil and groundwater contamination.
- evaluating the holistic environmental, costing, and social impacts of different AWRs reclamation and reuse practices.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will:

- acquire a better understanding of the role of AWR use in water scarcity alleviation and irrigation management;
- develop knowledge on the water treatment techniques for safe and proper management and use of AWR in agriculture;
- discuss irrigated agriculture and techniques suitable for the use of AWR and assess its impact on soil and crop production;
- highlight the regulation related to the use of AWR in agriculture and its management,
- implement sustainable water management in agriculture projects using AWR;
- develop knowledge on water quality monitoring methods for safe supply.

UNIT 7 – ECONOMIC PRINCIPLES OF IRRIGATED AGRICULTURE AND WATER MANAGEMENT

Basic concepts of economics applied in irrigated agriculture and water management at farm, district and basin level are explored for an efficient water allocation and irrigation projects' planning. By considering the major institutional dimensions of the Mediterranean irrigation sector, the following main topics are addressed:

- analysis of the main farm accounting balance sheet and income statement components,
- technical and allocative efficiency in multi-input and multi-output farm production process,
- agro-economic mathematical programming models,
- cost benefit analysis of irrigation projects

AIMS

Explaining:

- how to plan the optimal allocation and use of water resources at farm and irrigation district scale,
- how to assess the economic feasibility of irrigation projects,

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will:

- understand the role of economic parameters and criteria in the water management decision making process at farm and basin scale,
- acquire knowledge on quantitative methods used to support agricultural policies decision making,
- learn how to implement simple Cost/Benefit Analysis in irrigation projects.

UNIT 8 – ECO-ENVIRONMENTAL EVALUATION IN IRRIGATION: GOVERNANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY

The nature of water resources as both private and public good, the different and often conflicting uses and users of water, the complexity of water management systems are all factors that require the coordination of different stakeholders at all levels of government, a clear allocation of roles and responsibilities, the integration of different territorial scales and the development of capacity at the local level to design and implement appropriate strategies and policies. Further, water management today is faced with new challenges such as climate change, reduction of environmental impacts, the trade-off between equity and efficiency and sustainable food production. The following main topics are addressed:

- elements and dimensions of water governance: rules of the resource uses; enabling environment; stakeholders' participation; financing tools; indicators of good governance,
- models of water governance in Mediterranean countries with a particular focus on participatory approaches,
- irrigation water policies, strategies and tools in the Mediterranean context
- water policy and sustainability: the water footprint and the LCA approach

AIMS

Explaining:

- the interplay between actors, institutions and regulations shaping the decisions about use, allocation, development and management of water resources,
- drivers, challenges, main outcomes and shortcomings of water models, policies, strategies and tools in the Mediterranean context,
- the guiding principles and challenges of participatory approaches in irrigation management (PIM) and transfer (IMT) with a focus on the Mediterranean countries.
- the environmental impacts of water policies adoption in irrigation sector

LEARNING OUTCOMES

At the end of the course, the students will

- increase insight in the legal, political and institutional framework affecting water governance
- increase understanding of factors, processes, practices and instruments that determine the outcome of efforts to govern the water sector
- develop skills to comparatively assess sustainability of water policies in irrigation sector.

UNIT 9 – HOLISTIC DESIGN AND MANAGEMENT OF IRRIGATION PROJECTS

An irrigation project at district level is designed by capitalizing on the knowledge acquired in all the Teaching Units. The environmental, agronomic, engineering, and socio-economic dimensions are integrated to develop a comprehensive case study and an executive irrigation project at territorial level.

This process includes the analysis of climate, soil, and crop data; the identification of the optimal cropping pattern; and the hydraulic design of a large-scale pressurized distribution network accounting for different scenarios of water availability and quality, and energy sources (implementation of a photovoltaic system). This Unit integrates the use of GIS tools, simulation, and optimization models.

AIMS

The Unit aims at developing a comprehensive logical approach to the design and management of irrigation systems. Moreover, it intends to develop the analytical skills and abilities of trainees to observe, research, and interpret complex problems and solutions.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will be able to:

- analyse and interpret climate, soil and crop data;
- determine the crop response to water and soil hydrological behaviour;
- optimise water allocation for irrigation at farm and district level;
- design and model the energy and hydraulic operation and management performance of irrigation systems in a service-oriented perspective;
- assess the feasibility of a solar-powered pumping station from an engineering, financial and environmental perspectives.
- evaluate the economic feasibility and environmental impacts of irrigation projects.