



WEBINAR SERIES

Utilities Fight



Distance Makes the WOP Grow Stronger?

Challenges and Opportunities of Peer-to-Peer Learning in a COVID-19 Context

Outcome Brief

Fifth Session

9 December 2020, 13.30 – 15.30 CET

Introduction

Water and sanitation utilities are making extraordinary efforts to continue providing services to their customers during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the heavy burden it has caused them. Utilities worldwide are facing loss of revenue and reduced availability of critical materials. To these operational needs, the crisis is also slowing down investments in an already insufficiently funded sector, making it tougher to be an effective first line of defence.

The peer-to-peer support provided through Water Operators' Partnerships (WOPs) is proving to be of indisputable value to the crisis response of public operators. Nevertheless, the health crisis is also affecting the partnerships and is confronting the WOPs concept with unique challenges of its own.

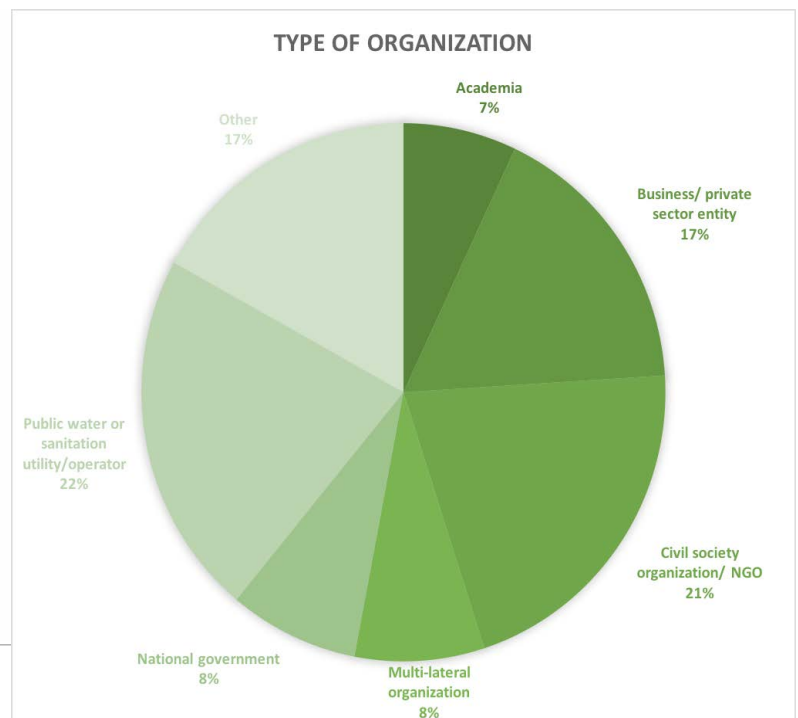
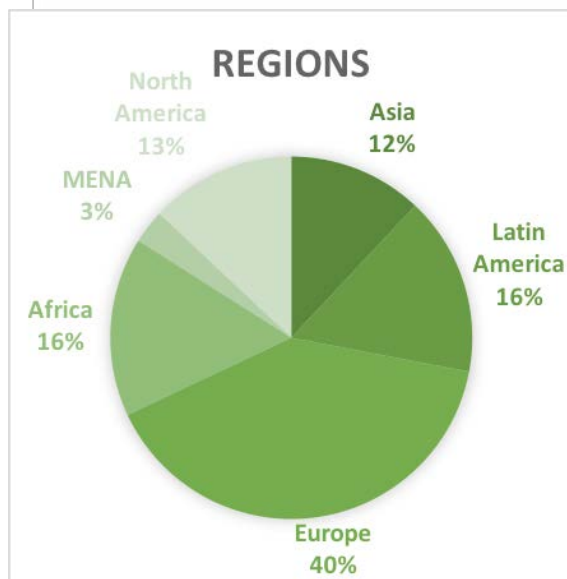
Travel restrictions in most countries worldwide are making it difficult for partner utilities to implement their capacity-building activities on the ground. Within this context, the flexible and resilient character of WOPs has become apparent. Partners are adapting project activities as well as communication and coordination mechanisms to the existing circumstances. They are adapting comprehensively and quickly to this scenario, designing and implementing new actions and finding long-term ways to continue collaborating, exploring the silver linings of a crisis that also gives the WOPs approach an opportunity to innovate. In doing so, they can ensure the continuity of mutual support to address the most urgent needs.

The webinar, jointly convened by GWOPA/UN-Habitat, GIZ and WaterWorX, brought together WOP project managers from different global regions. WOPs practitioners showcased best practices and lessons learnt on overcoming challenges related to COVID-19, with the aim of keeping up necessary momentum for positive change in water and sanitation utilities.

80 Webinar Participants

GENDER BALANCE

34% female, 66% male



Main take away messages

The distance between partners has affected progress in projects, particularly those that are in their initial stages of development. Those projects in which partners have been working for some time, are better able to continue interaction and collaboration from a distance in a more agile manner.

- The challenges posed by the travel restrictions have triggered innovations in the way of working among partners, notably with greater reliance on virtual means and, at times, recruitment of local experts who are able to provide the needed expertise in the absence of the mentor utility on-site.
- Relying on virtual communication is only suitable for certain staff and certain topics, most notably those who are familiar with the technology required and working on topics that do not require onsite direct support and training.
- The range of virtual initiatives put in practice by partners is extensive and has highlighted how WOP partners can rely on virtual means of communication to keep the support ongoing, although face-to-face communication is still necessary, particularly for some tasks and especially at the beginning of the projects. In many projects, before COVID restrictions, the support from specialised staff from the mentor company would mostly be limited to the times in which the person was at the project location. This frequently caused a loss in momentum in a specific improvement area. The travel restrictions have allowed partners to adopt other means and explore solutions to maintain momentum between missions.
- The COVID crisis and the reaction of partners have demonstrated the flexible nature of WOPs, especially where partners are able to adjust their planned activities and allow for more urgently matters to be addressed.
- For partners, navigating through these difficult times has, in many occasions, strengthened relations and brought partners closer together.

What WOPs are

The panelists from three continents shared experiences and reflected on the new creative practices adopted by partners during the COVID-19 pandemic in a webinar facilitated by Ms. Maria Pascual, member of the Secretariat of the GWO-PA/UN-Habitat, the global network created in 2009 to support water operators through WOPs.

The also Programme Management Officer opened the session with an explanation and reflection on the concept of WOPs. These types of partnerships are not-for-profit and involve two or more water and sanitation operators in a mentor-mentee relationship, with the aim of strengthening their capacity to sustainably provide quality services to all. According to Pascual, "trust is what generally drives the direction of the partnership. Partner utilities have a long-term aspiration, depending on the needs, and commit to help one another in a flexible manner, so whenever an emergency occurs, they are very adaptive."

Ms. Maria Pascual presented data recorded on the global practice database of the Alliance, including the total number of partnerships around the world, where these are happening, the GWOPA's main focus areas (NRW, O&M and asset management) and regional/national WOP platforms (see below).



Regional and national wop platforms



26 WOPs and COVID-19 challenges: the case of WaterWorX

The webinar continued with the keynote of Ms. Anke Verheij, Deputy Coordinator of the Dutch WaterWorX Programme, a partnership of public water operators that aims to increase access to sustainable water services for 10 million people between 2017-2030. WaterWorX is co-funded and jointly implemented by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGIS), the 10 Dutch water operators and local water operators throughout Africa, Asia and South America.

The WaterWorX Programme is now at the end of phase 1 of 3 (2016-2021) and the goal is to provide first-time access to water and sanitation to one million people. Over 350 deliverables have been fulfilled, including 15 investment proposals, 20 pilots with NRW reduction and 21 leadership programs. Moreover, water quality, hours of supply, and O&M, among others, in local water operators have improved substantially.

As an example, the Coordinator of the Programme explained how the WOP between Mwanza Urban Water Supply and Sanitation Authority (MWAUWASA) and VEI in Mwanza, Tanzania, succeeded in improving performance monitoring, and in repairing leakages and weak parts of the network. According to Ms. Verheij, these successes of the WOPs would not be possible if the effort was not made jointly with local staff, young experts, and with the involvement of organizations such as IHE Delft Institute for Water Education, the World Bank, Finish Mondial, the Blue Deal or GWOPA/UN-Habitat.

Progress affected by COVID-19 and challenges

The presentation continued on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected and is still having an impact on all the WaterWorX WOP projects. At the beginning of the outbreak, while the pandemic was affecting everyone, everywhere, almost all resident project managers from Dutch water utilities had to return to the Netherlands. After a few months, some returned to the partnering countries, while others are still based in the Netherlands. Ms. Verheij also explained that short-term experts are no longer in the field and are working remotely using online communications with travel to the project countries likely delayed until later in 2021.

Given the context and needs, the focus of the projects shifted to COVID-19 relief measures, such as hygiene promotion. Data management and webinars were boosted as they were easier to implement remotely, and partners engaged in frequent online communication.

Ms. Verheij reflected on the bright side of these challenging times, highlighting that project managers and local project coordinators found new ways of working, mainly by adapting interactions (e.g. organizing webinars, coaching sessions) and finding new ways to be more practical. In doing so, more utilities have been able to reach the work of WaterWorX.

One of the main challenges faced by the WOPs is the limited digital knowledge of local utilities, which makes it more difficult to work in a context of online communications. When remote communications take place, some topics that were previously discussed in the field are more difficult to address due to their sensitivity or the need to investigate the technical situation on site.

Opportunities

According to Ms. Verheij, more work than expected was completed virtually. Moving forward, as online working methods intensify, local staff is more engaged than ever with increased ownership. An equally important consequence of the travel restrictions is that the carbon footprint has been reduced enormously.

Ms. Verheij lastly remarked that rapid check-ups are now easier to conduct given the rapid and improved relations between mentor and mentee.

Experiences from WOPs around the world

The session continued with a panel discussion from WOP project managers and practitioners who tackled and reflected on the challenges, action plans and lessons learnt.

Ms. Charlotte Kopf. Dresden Wastewater Utility, Germany

In late 2019, the German operator Dresden Wastewater Utility, in corporation with StEB Köln and Berliner Wasserbetriebe, entered into a WOP with partner water and wastewater utilities of Lvivvodokanal, in the city of Lviv, Ukraine. The Ukrainian partner visited the facilities of the mentor, but the mentor visit could not be organised due to the outbreak of

COVID-19. According to Ms. Charlotte Kopf, “since we could not go to the Ukraine because of travel restrictions, we had to learn from other German operators with experience in WOPs and partnering with the Ukraine. We skipped the part of getting to know each other and had to go straight to the action part.”

In the midst of the global pandemic, the WOP started with the fact-finding process, and a work plan is now being established. The focus of some initial activities is on online communications and online knowledge sharing. Activities have included the production of videos on specific topics with subtitles in different languages to share the know-how of the mentor utility. In order to enable knowledge exchange, hybrid meetings are held between staff from both utilities working in similar working areas.

Commenting on the WOP, Ms Kopf highlighted that the beginning of the process was challenging and it took time to adapt to the new online formats. The technical equipment was not sophisticated enough and the language barrier was another obstacle, exacerbated by the distance and impossibility to hold face-to-face meetings. Even though the projection model is hybrid, Ms. Kopf expressed that the project will resume the travels whenever is allowed.

Mr. Noriel Catipon. Project Manager, Manila Water Company, Philippines

Manila Water, the mentor operator for Danang, Vietnam (DAWACO), shared their experience in mentoring in times of COVID-19. WaterLinks, organization responsible for the project coordination, identified this example to showcase good practices for mentoring in times of COVID-19 and travel ban.

Partners expressed that the success of this WOP is due to the good capacity of absorption and the resilience of the mentee DAWACO, in addition to the fact that Vietnam was less affected by the pandemic compared to other countries. Staff were able to work almost without restriction, going to the office and intermittently on site.

Nevertheless, the COVID-19 crisis has affected the WOP and travel restrictions have slowed down the progress of the project. Mr. Noriel Catipon explained as an example that some of the field work trainings and activities (e.g. leak detection) have not taken place.

To overcome the challenges, both peer partners decided to adapt their interaction, adopting the following key strategies:

- Formation of dedicated teams for each working area. Manila Water assigned a dedicated manager, whose expertise is aligned with the working area, with other several staff from the mentee utility, working as a team. Mr. Noriel Catipon explained that, with this strategy, they have been able to make progress in the different working areas of the WOP (Customer Service, NRW, Asset Management, HR).
- Revisit activities and agree on steps and action plans. Mentor and mentee scrutinized all the planned activities and gauged if they were still doable during the pandemic. The different dedicated teams met separately and developed the revised action plans for each working area. Some activities were suspended because they were deemed not responsive to the needs of the mentee under the current circumstances and the teams decided to focus on the essential;
- Adopt online and virtual meetings to keep the communication open and hold online trainings and webinars. According to Mr. Catipon, the main challenge is the communication and language barrier, which has had consequences on the training of staff as well as on the validation of progress and data.

Mr. Catipon expressed that the main lesson learned is that follow-up meetings should be more frequent to maintain communication, and he considered online meetings and trainings to be already the new norm.

Mr. Fernando Luis Villalvir Martínez. Manager, Aguas de Siguatepeque, Honduras

“The pandemic not only brought problems, but also opportunities. One of those is that it has obliged utilities to catch up and innovate”. According to Mr. Fernando Luis Villalvir Martínez, Aguas de Siguatepeque, Honduras, started to focus on the idea of generating change using online exchange and taking advantage of the opportunities WOP platforms, such as WOP-LAC (regional WOP platform for Latin America and the Caribbean), offer to operators.

“The pandemic not only brought problems, but also opportunities. One of those is that it has obliged utilities to catch up and innovate”. According to Mr. Fernando Luis Villalvir Martínez, Aguas de Siguatepeque, Honduras, started to focus on the idea of generating change using online exchange and taking advantage of the opportunities WOP platforms, such as WOP-LAC (regional WOP platform for Latin America and the Caribbean), offer to operators.

“The pandemic not only brought problems, but also opportunities. One of those is that it has obliged utilities to catch up and innovate”. According to Mr. Fernando Luis Villalvir Martínez, Aguas de Siguatepeque, Honduras, started to focus

on the idea of generating change using online exchange and taking advantage of the opportunities WOP platforms, such as WOP-LAC (regional WOP platform for Latin America and the Caribbean), offer to operators.

Mr. Martínez shared with the audience how the partnership with Aguas de Quito (potential mentor from Ecuador) emerged as a result of common challenges and a shared commitment and motivation to work. He underlined that both partners, “knew the difficulties, but we also wanted to get close to the experience.”

An online meeting was facilitated by WOP-LAC with the two potential partner utilities. Despite the adverse circumstances, the host succeeded in mobilizing managers, specialists and workers from several departments of the mentor and mentee utilities. The attendance was high, according to Mr. Martínez and various actors and stakeholders of the water and sanitation sector participated in the virtual gathering, including CSO representatives, members of the governments of Honduras and Ecuador, international development banks, and experts from the academia. Pressing issues in the LAC region, such as management of water sources and environmental degradation, were discussed extensively.

According to Mr. Martínez, a central lesson learnt is that future meetings should take place in a hybrid setting, since monitoring and follow-up can be managed virtually and are less time-consuming and resource intensive. Finally, the Manager of Aguas de Siguatepeque reflected on the need to promote more platforms like WOP-LAC.

Questions to the panelists

The final slot of the webinar was reserved for attendees to interact with the four panelists, including the keynote, and share their questions and comments. Below some of the questions addressed:

Q: How can we minimize the impact of COVID-19 on short-term specialists?

Ms. Anke Verheij: “Luckily, we already worked with our partners for at least two years before COVID-19. Almost all our short-term experts already travelled to the project country several times, and are familiar with the local situation. This makes it easier to provide support from a distance. Also, the local teams are key in providing technical support. What helps to minimize the impact is to work in small groups, this makes it interactive and appealing.”

Q: I would be interested to know if COVID-19 shifted mentee operators’ priorities and where/how the WOPs adapted to this. Were any WOPs able to take advantage of heightened appreciation/concern of water and sanitation services?

Ms. Anke Verheij: “Many of our partners took a role in promoting hygiene practices, when it was not a priority before. Moreover, there was also the possibility to channel some funds from international financiers to WOPs since there was more focus on water and sanitation due to the crisis.”

Ms. Charlotte Kopf: “In Germany, we started to analyze the wastewater in our treatment plant to relate to the amount of people infected in the city. So a new working area started. We will use it with our work with our Ukrainian partner in the WOP to fight COVID-19.”

Mr. Fernando Luis Villalvir Martínez: “The priorities have shifted dramatically. Honduras is heavily impacted by the pandemic, especially the country’s economy. We began to make decisions to guarantee the operation and maintenance of the system while planning to raise international funds.”

Q: To what extent do you feel that COVID-19 has affected the relationship between partners?

Mr. Fernando Luis Villalvir Martínez: “It has affected, but we need to focus on what unites us; not only on the technical difficulties we might be having as operators, but also on the emotions we are experiencing as human beings.”

Ms. Anke Verheij: “Sharing feelings such as stress and uncertainty helped in getting closer in the relationship. But the longer the pandemic lasts, the more difficult it will be to maintain the close relationship we have.”

Q: What advice would you give for those planning upcoming WOPs given likely continued COVID-19 related travel restraints and taking into account the climate benefits of reducing travel?

Ms. Charlotte Kopf: “In our case, as we were unable to travel to the partner country, what helped a lot was the exchange we had with different engineering companies from Germany working in the Ukraine.”

Ms. Anke Verheij: “Hiring more local consultants and trainers (HR, organizational development, etc.) is very helpful.”

Resources

Session Resources

[GWOPA COVID-19 webinar series](#)
[GWOPA YouTube channel](#)

Further resources

[GWOPA COVID-19 Updates](#)
[UN-Habitat COVID-19](#)

Let the discussion continue!

Webinars often raise more questions than they can answer. To facilitate further discussion, exchange and learning among webinar participants and the audience, GWOPA/UN-Habitat has opened a Workplace group. If you would like to be invited to this group to exchange questions, ideas and resources with others about water utilities and COVID-19 challenges, please kindly send an email to info@gwopa.org


GWOPA
Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance

UN  **HABITAT**
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE