

Enabling WOPs: Mobilizing European Actors for Solidarity-based Water Partnerships



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Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance

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Enabling WOPs: Mobilizing European Actors for Solidarity-based Water Partnerships



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Introduction: A new momentum for WOPs in Europe

Each new crisis is a reminder of how essential access to water and sanitation is. These basic services are at the heart of health, hygiene, and food issues, but more broadly, they condition the development and well-being of societies. Global challenges like climate change, unplanned urbanisation and ecosystem decline negatively affect water infrastructure and services. Water and sanitation matters are increasingly becoming a priority for all local, national, and international actors.

Recognising water as a key issue, the UN General Assembly dedicated one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to water and sanitation. SDG6: Clean water and sanitation for all underpins the accomplishment of almost all the other seventeen interlinked SDGs. The UN General Assembly also launched the 'Water Action Decade 2018-2028' to mobilise action that will help transform how we manage water and avert a global water crisis.

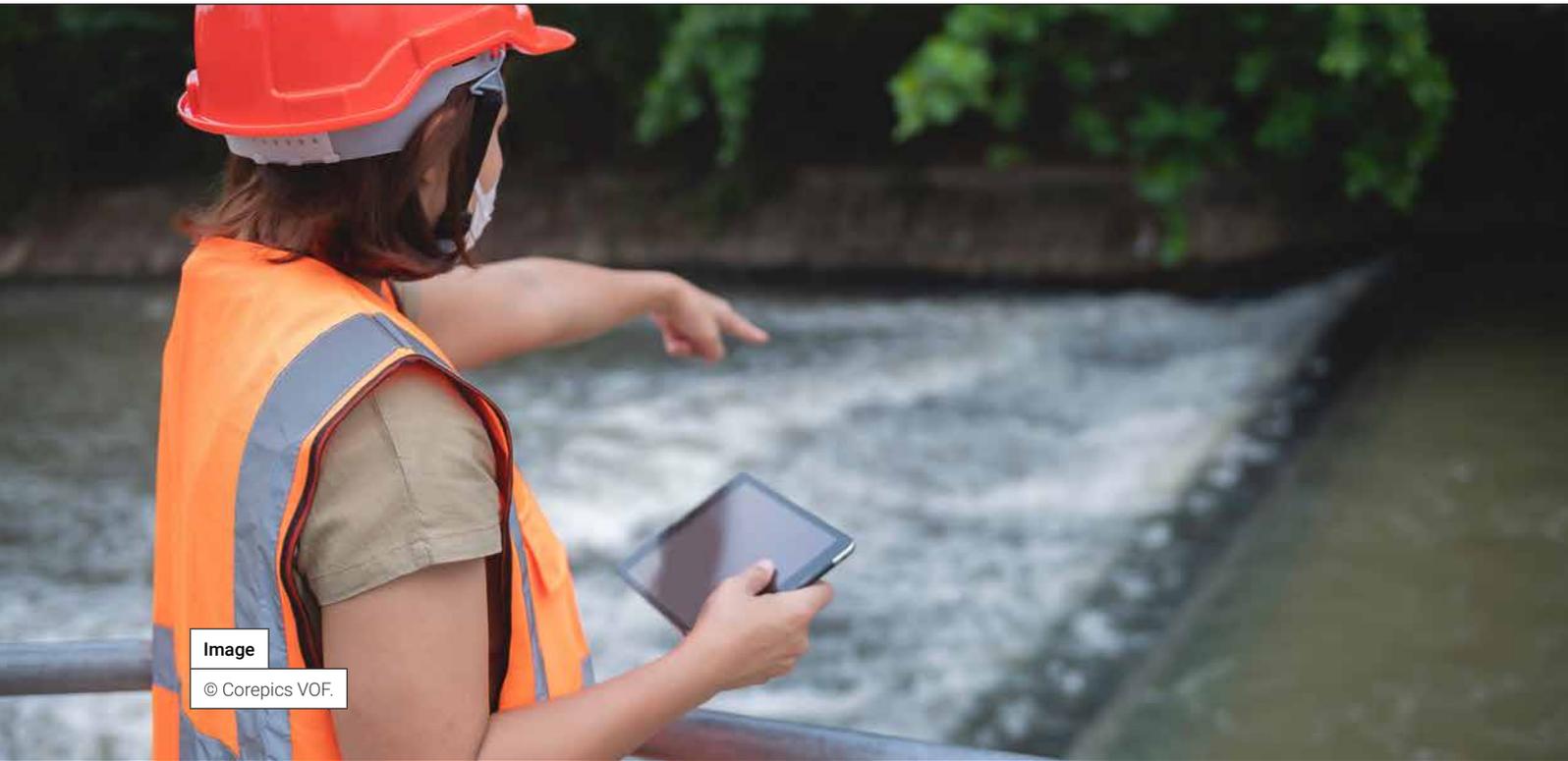
In this context, the Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance (GWOPA) was launched by UN-Habitat in 2009. The international network was created to support water operators through Water Operators' Partnerships (WOPs), and has grown and developed across the world over the last decade.

At the core of GWOPA are WOPs: peer-support exchanges between water operators on a not-for-profit basis, allowing utilities to strengthen their capacity, enhance their performance, and provide a better service to more people. WOPs stem from a recognition of water and sanitation utilities' pinnacle role in delivering services to reach the SDGs, and of capacity development as fundamental to achieving and sustaining service improvements. Recognized as a practical and high-value approach, WOPs have been growing all over the world to help address the challenges of providing water and sanitation services for an expanding world population.

In recent years, a growing number of public water utilities from EU member states have begun sharing their expertise with peers in lower- and middle-income countries through WOPs. Yet the increasing trend is not commensurate with the needs and opportunities at stake. A major limitation is the number of utilities that have the support and resources to go out and help their peers in other countries, using skills and good will that they have in abundance.

Europe is home to thousands of water operators with great potential to participate in Water Operators' Partnerships as mentors. The capacity and likelihood of EU water utilities operators to get involved in WOPs depends to a large extent on enabling factors. Several constraints have so far prevented a wider uptake of WOPs by European utilities and supporting institutions which need to be addressed if WOPs are to be taken up on par with the need.

This report examines these factors and presents recommendations to scale up WOPs in Europe by showcasing examples of enabling frameworks and best practices from countries and cities throughout Europe. It is designed to support all stakeholders: water and wastewater utilities, governments, financial institutions, development partners, civil society and anyone interested in making it easier for operators to help their peers through WOPs. It also makes proposals to provide further impetus for developing and scaling up these partnerships across Europe.



Image

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1. A European View of WOPs

1.1. What are WOPs?

The WOP is an approach designed to contribute to the mentee utility's capacity development and performance improvement. It can take a multitude of forms depending on the context and field expectations. The nature of a WOP can vary significantly in terms of duration, focus of work, and the number and nature of partners involved. Some WOPs are very simple, focusing on a single technical issue and lasting less than a year. Others are multi-faceted, covering several aspects of service delivery and organisational functions, often lasting for three or more years. Furthermore, WOPs can be used in a range of settings: from urban to small towns, and from middle income countries to low income and fragile states. Nevertheless, WOPs have several core characteristics in common:

- At the heart of each WOP there is a utility partner with an identified capacity need, and at least one utility partner willing and able to help it. These partners are often referred to as mentor and mentee (although experienced WOP practitioners note that the terms overlook the two-way exchange that often happens in WOPs and may perpetuate unhelpful dynamics). The partnerships can also involve more than two water and sanitation service providers.
- WOPs aim to be demand-driven, in that the mentee partner actively shapes the support it receives, in collaboration with mentors and donors. Hence, the mentor and the mentee are equally important actors, insofar as both define the framework of the partnership, unlike other more traditional top-down solidarity projects.
- The WOP is not to be used for commercial purposes. It is a solidarity-based support approach, carried out on a not-for-profit basis. Through funding programs or internal mechanisms, the mentor operators can have their intervention costs partially or fully covered.
- The agreements to establish WOPs are results-oriented and are based on peer-to-peer exchanges, mutual trust, and the good governance principles of integrity, transparency and accountability.

- WOPs cover a wide range of partnership topics to make public water and sanitation services more efficient, effective and sustainable. WOP objectives may include:
 - Strengthening management and technical competencies
 - Introducing knowledge, skills and new processes
 - Implementing operational and organisational changes
 - Promoting Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)
 - Bettering environmental performance
 - Extending access to services (in particular service to the poor)
 - Facilitating access to finance
 - Building human resource capacity
 - Improving governance

1.2. Why WOPs?

According to feedback from those involved in WOPs, there are multiple real benefits to participating in them, even if sometimes difficult to quantify. Whether at the organisational level or at the level of the teams involved, the rewards are greater than the constraints encountered. In fact, there are numerous layers of tangible value created from participating in an international partnership project. WOP practitioners have identified the following benefits of the WOP approach:

From the point of the mentor and mentee operators, and staff involved in WOPs, there are many advantages.

- One of most remarkable and appreciated aspects of WOPs highlighted by mentee operators is that support comes from professional counterparts who possess hands-on experience grappling with day-to-day utility challenges. It is a peer-to-peer collaboration between staff with similar areas of activity, and work together in trust.
- Through the implementation of WOPs, mentor operator staff learn other ways of doing their jobs, develop skills to train others, and, as a result, can enhance not only the performance of the mentee utility that needs help or guidance but also that of their own utility. The participation of employees from different professions in a partnership usually leads to improved work efficiency within the mentor operator through the technical exchanges generated by collaboration in the WOPs.
- Staff involved in WOPs are very positive about the rewards the partnerships generate, finding the experience often inspiring, instructive and meaningful. In most circumstances, these cooperation programs offer opportunities to involve staff members of various job classifications throughout the organisation who may not have expected such opportunities.
- Rather than substituting capacity, WOPs focus on helping local utility staff to make lasting improvements that can continue well beyond the life of the partnership. The WOP motto is “doing with, not for”. Therefore, WOPs help put the mentee operator in the driver’s seat to sustain

improvements over the long-term, contributing to broad and lasting change. It is a partnership model flexible and adaptable enough to respond to evolving needs.

From the point of development banks and agencies, and more broadly speaking, a WOP is a very effective mechanism in terms of financing and sustainability.

- WOPs have a proven track-record and can be highly cost-effective. Compared to other forms of technical assistance and capacity development, WOPs are relatively low-cost due to their non-profit nature and frequent benefit from in-kind contribution by partners. It is a cost-effective model for strengthening utility capacity and performance, considering not only immediate revenue gains but also long-term sustainability benefits.
- They are a frequent support to investment programs and can increase their sustainability. WOPs bring long-term quality support to maintenance and operation activities of the utilities which strengthens investments on infrastructure.
- The skills acquired through WOPs lead to efficiencies that improve financial performance and can facilitate access to finance for infrastructure extension and improved service provision. It is possible to identify three key types of WOPs regarding investment sustainability. The first one precedes a new investment program, helping to diagnose and develop action plans to improve operator functionality and capacity. The second one implies that investment program implementation is accompanied by a WOP in order to increase the likelihood of success and sustainability of the investment. Finally, the third type of WOP connected with an investment program is focused more specifically on aspects of operation and maintenance to ensure the infrastructure's sustainability, at the end of a project cycle.

There are many other advantages for operators, governments, and - more globally - the world water community, to implement WOPs.

- Over time, WOPs can have a significant multiplier effect. As water operators gain capacity having themselves been supported by a mentoring partnership, they are then able to mentor others.

Morocco: After implementing numerous WOPs with utilities from Belgium, France and Spain, the Moroccan water operator ONEE (Office National de l'Electricité et de l'Eau Potable) is strongly committed to sharing its knowledge and skills with other water utilities across Sub-Saharan Africa to aid their capacity-building. Another example of the ripple effect of WOPs, wherein former mentees become champion mentors, is the water operator in Phnom Penh (Cambodia) which became a mentor for the operator of Batambang City (Cambodia)¹ and others after having worked with Yarra Valley (Australia).

¹ www.gwopa.org/resources/wops-database



Image

At the right of the picture, ONEE Head of R&D Department, Mokhtar Jaait, during the session 'The Power of Peer Partnerships: EU-backed Mentorship for Utility Improvement' at the 9th World Water Forum. ONEE is supporting under the EU-WOP Programme the Office National de l'Assainissement du Sénégal (ONAS) in a WOP that focuses heavily on sanitation © GWOPA / UN-Habitat.

- For a government or local authority, supporting WOPs could be a way to strengthen its commitment to international cooperation and its contribution to achieving the SDGs. To the extent that WOPs promote medium/long-term partnerships, they may also open the door to wider collaboration between local governments, beyond water and sanitation services.
- WOPs contribute to the brand image and reputation of mentor operators by demonstrating their capacity for solidarity to help other communities. It can be evaluated as a contribution of their corporate social responsibility (CSR).

For instance, since 1999, Dutch water utility, Dunea, has actively implemented corporate social responsibility projects through donations. It receives approximately €69,000 annually and uses this money to help utilities in India, Bangladesh, Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe.²

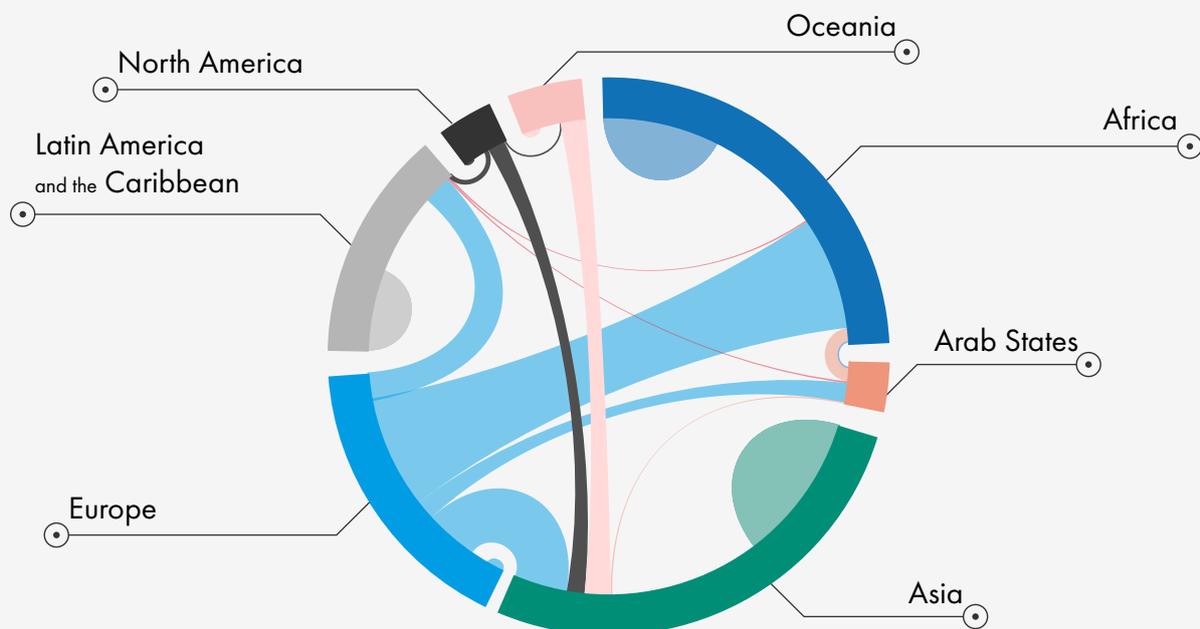
- As a WOP is a medium or long-term partnership, it enables the involvement of a diversity of essential players in the water sector and beyond. It generates networking opportunities with many different kinds of organisations and institutions that can be profitable for the utilities and the governments involved.

² www.gwopa.org/resources/wops-database

1.3. WOPs' European History

The history of WOPs in Europe goes back to the early 1990s when the Baltic Sea WOPs or PUPs (Public-Public Partnerships in Water) launched an initiative under the Baltic Sea Program (Helsinki Convention, 1992) where public water authorities such as Stockholm Vatten and Helsinki Water partnered with cities in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which had just left the Soviet Union. Since then, more European countries have initiated their own efforts to help build the capacity of water operators beyond their borders. European operators are willing to share their skills, knowledge, and resources with utilities elsewhere facing difficulties in providing water and sanitation services to their own citizens. In the policy context of a commitment to international cooperation, increasing numbers of local authorities and their operators are involved in water-focused partnerships.

Today, the majority of the partnerships involve operators in the Global South. Of the more than 400 WOPs recorded in the [GWOPA Global WOPs database](#), 38% are North-South and 52% South-South. The remaining are triangular partnerships for 8%, or North-North which only accounts for 2%. Nearly 3% are WOPs between European service providers (with a majority of Greek and Eastern European mentees). Overall, 35% of WOPs are mentored by European operators with an estimated US\$ 290 million in funding in partnerships spread over all continents, but more than half of which are in Africa.



Image

WOPs Interaction between and within Regions (WOPs Data Portal, March 2022). © GWOPA / UN-Habitat.

Different approaches and formats for the implementation of WOPs have emerged in Europe. WOPs range from well-structured national programs to spontaneous collaborations between municipalities, from WOP initiatives anchored in national legislation and bilateral cooperation programs to independent partnerships benefiting from decentralised cooperation mechanisms. WOPs can either be triggered by the motivation and vision of a single mayor or put forward thanks to the conviction of the workforce in a water utility. The **documented cases of WOPs** illustrate the diversity of the practice involving European operators.

Project results have demonstrated the effectiveness of WOPs in improving the capacity and operational performance of utilities and financial feasibility of investment projects. Launched in 2013, the Boosting Effectiveness of Water Operators' Partnerships (BEWOP) project, now in its fourth phase, is a research and outreach collaboration between IHE-Delft Water Institute and GWOPA/UN-Habitat which aims to strengthen knowledge for and about WOPs. Improving the ways that WOP results are observed and reported has been a central component. Since utility key performance indicators (KPIs) are slow to respond to the capacity changes that occur through WOPs, the project has developed a framework and partnership monitoring tool which allows observation of the progressive results of WOPs. This framework of analysis has improved the capture of WOPs' results and helped clarify how they effect change within a utility.

1.4. European Commitment to WOPs

The European Union, at different levels, is backing solidarity-based partnerships in the water and sanitation sector. In 2011, a declaration by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe requested that the Council and the Commission "encourage(s) European countries to adopt the principle of 1% solidarity for water". In January 2012, the Commission on social issues of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly made an identical declaration in which it stated that: "We suggest that the European Union and the Council of Europe encourage their Member States to set up policies enabling the authorities responsible for water supply and sanitation services to voluntarily dedicate up to 1% of the revenues generated from water distribution to solidarity actions (such as capacity building, sharing of resources and emergency aid) in this sector at national, European and international levels".

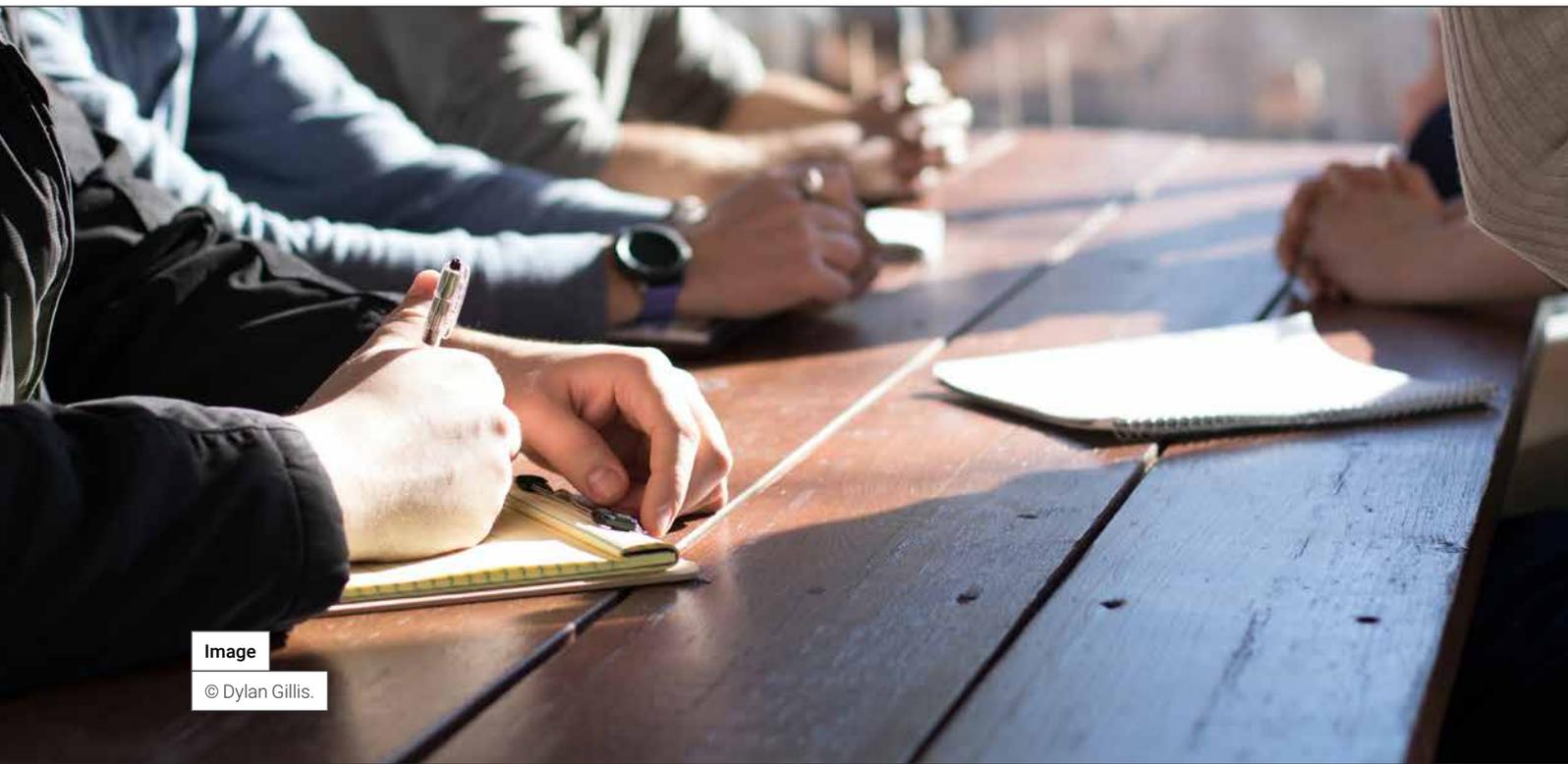
The EU has also set up funding programs to support international cooperation in water and sanitation and partnership instruments. A financing instrument, the ACP-EU Water Facility (2004-2011), had the objective of using partnerships to build capacity in the water and sanitation sector in African, Caribbean and Pacific countries through the transfer of expertise and knowledge from European water utilities. Although not exclusive to peer partnerships, the programme funded a good number of WOPs. Another instrument, TAIEX (Technical Assistance and Information Exchange) facilitates the sharing of EU best practices, and in recent years has become available to countries covered by development policies and Partnership Instruments worldwide. Since the start of their operations, TAIEX and its longer-term sibling program, Twinning, have promoted economic development and shared the best of EU countries' expertise. In a milestone commitment to WOPs in 2020, the EU created a dedicated WOP programme in collaboration with GWOPA/UN-Habitat. The **EU-WOP Programme**, with €8 million from the European Commission DG INTPA, is a dedicated Water Operators Partnerships initiative, aiming at increasing access to water

and sanitation services, improving operators' capacity and performance, mobilising financial resources towards SDG6 and strengthening WOP engagement throughout Europe. The open call revealed an unprecedented demand for WOPs and maturity in WOP proposals. 142 WOP project proposals were submitted, over 90 of which were deemed eligible and over 50 deemed to have 'high potential'. Of these projects, 22 were selected to proceed with WOP projects of 36 months' duration. Among them, around three-quarters (15) are being led by European utilities, supporting counterparts in Africa, Arab Countries, Asia Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region. Another fifteen European organisations (NGOs or public institutions, other than utilities) will support the selected WOPs from different fronts, including by providing technical support, research or expertise in benchmarking and human rights.

Managed by GWOPA/UN-Habitat, the programme involves partner utilities from African, Arab, Asian, European, and Latin American Countries. Launched at the 4th Global WOPs Congress, these new WOPs are set to begin implementation in early 2022. The EU-WOP Programme has encouraged the involvement of first-time participants to WOPs, as well as experienced practitioners.

The WOP between the operator Società Metropolitana Acque Torino (SMAT), acting as mentor, and the Indian mentee partner, Odisha Water Supply and Sewerage Board, aims to upgrade capacities in wastewater and faecal sludge management by involving three other institutions, Hydroaid– Water for Development Management Institute, Politecnico of Turin, and WaterLinks. Adopting the "capacity development approach" as the basis for cooperation in all the technical fields in which SMAT operates, they are committed to providing support in training, programs, modelling, and facilitation.

A WOP between Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (DWASA) and VEI B.V. includes two additional partners, IHE Delft Institute for Water Education, and Eau et Vie (Nantes). The project aims not only to improve the capacity and performance of DWASA in non-revenue-water management and water services delivery improvement in low income areas, but also to develop its WOP mentoring capacity, to be able to support other utilities in Bangladesh and in South-East Asia. IHE Delft and DWASA recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding for establishing a joint centre for training for staff of DWASA and other WASAs in Bangladesh.



Image

© Dylan Gillis.

2. Scaling Up WOPs in Europe: Elements of a Supporting Framework for WOPs

The capacity and likelihood of European water utilities to get involved in WOPs will depend to a large extent on enabling conditions. Various factors can, individually or combined with one another, facilitate the implementation of WOPs. These factors range from political motivations to international recognition. Each criteria is presented below and illustrated by examples drawn from counties, regions and cities of Europe.

Recommendations are also presented. Recognizing the various existing national WOP programs, and recent and on-going commitments by the EU and European institutions to increase the use of WOPs in development cooperation, specific improvements are still needed. These recommendations target a range of audiences who can play a part in enabling WOPs among European actors.

2.1. Willingness and Support by Elected Politicians and Civil Society

2.1.1. A Strong Political Will from the Local and National Authorities: a 'Sine Qua Non' Condition

Above all, the implementation and the conditions of good management of water and sanitation services are the responsibility of political leaders. Several configurations exist to define the operational framework of public services used in different countries. It can be fully governed within a municipal institutional framework, internalised within the local government, or through a para-municipal structure (corporate utilities with, for example, a board of directors). These options are also available at a national level. However, in all cases, the political decision-making body is responsible for defining the organising authority

for the service. Hence, policymakers are key actors in creating favourable frameworks for WOPs to be realised. Strong political will is a sine qua non condition for scaling up the implementation of effective WOPs. National and local governments play a key role in implementing policies, designing institutional and organisational frameworks, and enabling legislation to facilitate or enhance the WOP practice, both on the side of mentor and the mentee operators. They are also decision-makers who allocate national resources or decentralised fund-raising capacity to the local level for effective implementation of WOPs.

Local governments in the Netherlands and France make use of their national decentralised cooperation laws to develop WOPs. Spain has a long tradition of municipal international cooperation, and Spanish municipalities have been active in WOPs through decentralised municipal cooperation, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean. For example, the Catalan region mobilises municipalities through the “Fons Català de Cooperació al Desenvolupament” (Catalan Fund for Cooperation and Development). In Switzerland, Solidarit’eau Suisse enables Swiss municipalities and water authorities to support water supply projects in developing countries.



Image

Project implemented in Nicaragua and funded by the Fondo de Cooperación para Agua y Saneamiento (FCAS, Cooperation Fund for Water and Sanitation) of the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID). The fund has a total of €1,597,000 available © AECID.

Italy: Water Funds for decentralised cooperation. In the previous 15 years, Italy has seen several funds created for decentralised cooperation on water and sanitation, for example the Water Right Foundation. Funds are leveraged from several municipalities and dedicated to water projects with or without the involvement of technical staff from the municipal water services. Publiacqua S.p.A., the company that manages the integrated water service in the Middle Valdarno Basin, in Tuscany, has been implementing development projects on water related issues. Donating €0.01 per cubic metre of water consumed by users to a Fund named “L’Acqua è di tutti” which exists to realise interventions in those countries where water is insufficient or badly managed.

In order to promote WOPs as a mechanism for international cooperation and solidarity at the level of governments and their water and sanitation utilities, several measures can be put in place:

- Implement of a joint strategy between local/national governments and utilities in order to highlight and showcase the technical expertise of operators. For the mentor operator, it is a matter of promoting its technical skills and examples of best practice through joint cooperation programs. For the local/national authority, this type of technical cooperation is a way to promote itself through the expertise of its utility.
- Promote WOPs as a cooperation tool within ‘sister cities’ or twinning agreements, and also within decentralised cooperation activities emphasising the concepts of solidarity-based partnerships and peer-to-peer learning and exchange between cities and municipalities.
- During exchange visits between partner cities/regions, organized field visits, such as to infrastructural facilities, can facilitate direct contact between colleagues and provide concrete opportunities for sharing operational know-how.
- Build a connection between elected officials. Political support from both sides of the partnership is critical to launching and sustaining partnerships. Create a governance structure for the partnerships that involves elected officials and allows them to meet.
- Develop awareness and communication campaigns to inform citizens about the solidarity and cooperation activities of the local authority. Celebrate how their WOPs are supporting water and sanitation services in other cities.

France: In 2015, the Rennes Basin Water Authority (La Collectivité Eau du Bassin Rennais) signed a three-year partnership agreement with the City of Beitunia in the West Bank. The objective was to prepare a drinking water master plan to identify future investment priorities and to train the Beitunia service provider staff. Within the framework of this WOP, training and exchange of experience between elected officials of the two communities were planned. The WOP also planned to initiate citizen cooperation with Rennes to help consolidate the partnership.

2.1.2. The Role of Civil Society: an Important Element for Anchoring the WOP in the Field

Political support is essential and can be fuelled by pressure from an engaged civil society. Grassroots initiatives from citizens and water customers can influence political leaders and decision-makers towards human rights-centred policies and measures, not only at home but through international cooperation. The *raison d’être* of most collaborative partnerships and twinning initiatives between cities in different countries stems from political will, and also from grassroots organisations.

The growing awareness of water issues led, through global pressure from civil society, to the recognition of the Human Right to Water and Sanitation by the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council in 2010. Based on this UN recognition, associations, unions and other civil society actors gathered for the “Right2Water” coalition launched in Europe in 2013.

This European Citizens’ initiative Right2Water led the European parliament to adopt a landmark resolution on the right to water and sanitation in September 2015. This resolution included a clause stating that EU development projects in water and sanitation should make use of solidarity-based partnerships, in line with GWOPA’s efforts. The coalition not only promoted WOPs as a mechanism in themselves, but also requested that water operators dedicate a percentage of their annual turnover for WOPs in developing countries.

The Netherlands: Customers’ involvement in WOPs. Water for Life is a foundation set up by the drinking water companies Vitens - Evides Waterbedrijf, WML and Waterbedrijf Groningen.

Their customers can become permanent donors and contribute money through their water bills to the foundation. Both customers and non-customers can make a single donation or raise money through events they organise themselves.

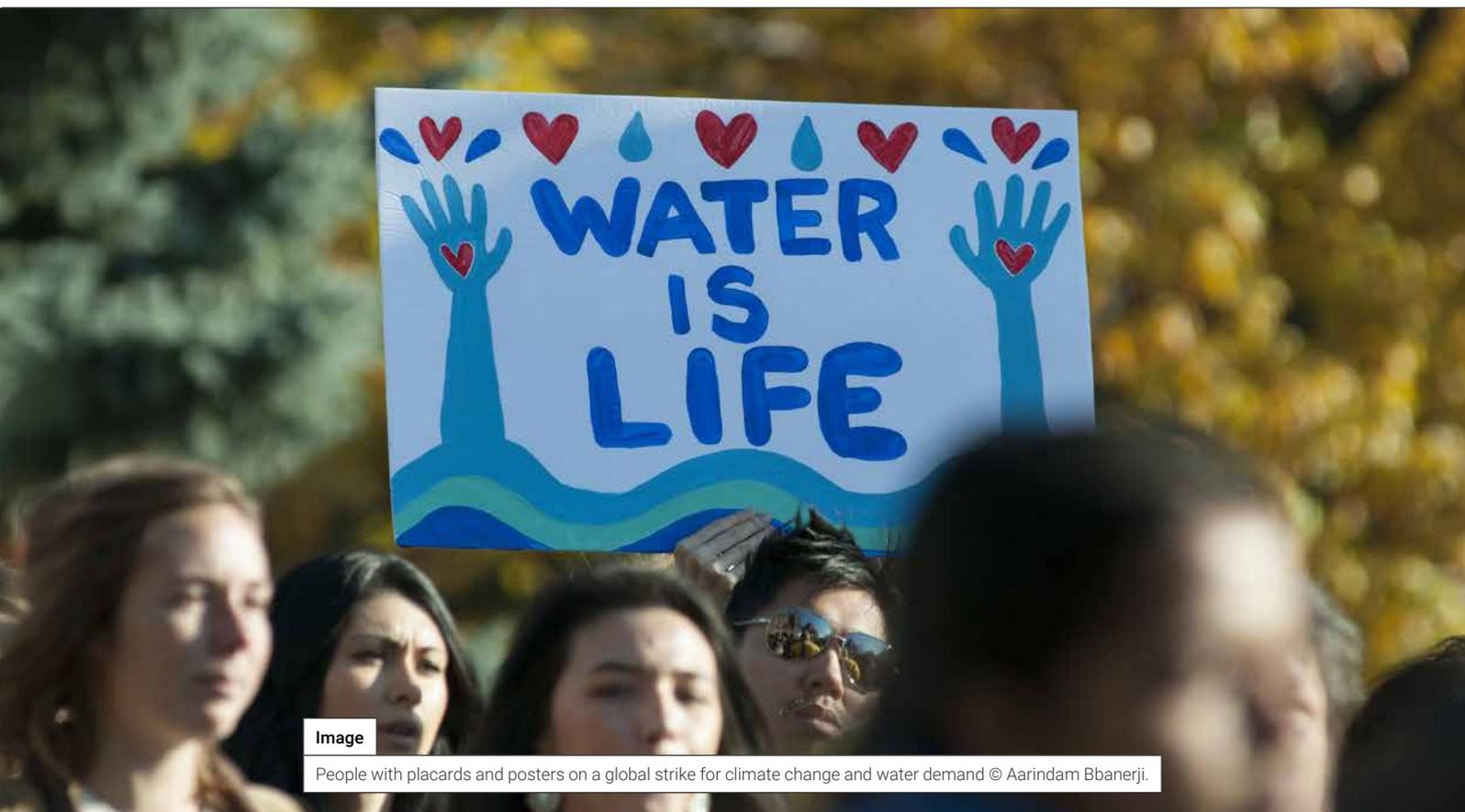
At local and national level, citizens’ initiatives can be a driving force to promote WOPs.

- Raising the awareness of the citizens and customers who value and demand even more effective international solidarity and action from their authorities is an important component of a supporting framework for WOPs.
- Effort is required to ensure transparency about the projects being implemented. Transparent information sharing about the WOP can help build civil society and customer trust and support for the partnership on both sides.
- Developing synergies with other stakeholders, such as associations, professional networks, cooperation agencies, unions, and NGOs can increase the impact of a WOP while building broader-based support for the partnership. The purpose is also to fully integrate all relevant political and socio-cultural dimensions.
- GWOPA includes a range of member organisations worldwide as utilities and utility associations, international financial institutions, labour unions, civil society organisations, development partners, and learning institutions. This platform of diverse actors could be better utilised by operators to anchor their projects in the field.

2.2. Water and Sanitation Utilities: the Need for External and Internal Backing

In addition to communities, operators must find their own value in doing WOPs. They must identify the benefits and added value such a partnership can bring for the utility and its staff. An environment that is friendly to WOPs is one that addresses the human and organisational dimensions of these partnerships, in addition to enabling them legally, financially and politically.

Feedback from the field shows that a diversity of motivations are driving operators to do WOPs. For example, Belgian operators involved in WOPs have said they are motivated by their will to build a learning and skill-development environment for their staff, by exposing them to different socio-cultural contexts and technical challenges. Finland is launching a national WOP program with a clear motivation to attract young talent to the water and sanitation sector by offering an international dimension to their professional careers while contributing to Finland's international development commitments.



This motivation is also shared by other Nordic European countries like Norway and Denmark. Some operators have established privileged relationships with other services, while others want to enhance their international reputation or increase their technical skills by training their “mentee” counterparts and by sharing their practices.

The Netherlands: WOPs supporting staff rights and working environment. WOP Case: Mwanza Urban Water and Sewerage Authority (MWAUWASA) (Tanzania) and Dunea (The Netherlands). This WOP focused not only on transfer of technical knowledge between utilities on non-revenue water, but also revenue collection and water conservation. For the first time in this type of partnership, Dunea, the mentor utility developed and implemented an Employee Satisfaction Survey (EES) as well as a Customer Satisfaction Survey (CSS) as a means to collaborate with the workers union to gather employee suggestions. The survey results were compiled into an action plan with 27 recommendations, covering areas that included the organisation of work, safety, training, and participation. This WOP is an example of how the concerns of the utility's staff can be placed at the heart of the partnership and how the findings of the WOP can contribute to improving the working conditions of employees.

Another recommendation is to create a dedicated team within the utility to organise WOPs. Such a "WOP unit" could be in charge of formulating WOPs and implementing human resource policies that motivate and support staff to get involved. It could help the utility identify the adequate personnel, and train them to share their technical know-how within such partnerships. As this task is time-consuming but beneficial for the WOP, some of the funding should partially cover the cost of this team dedicated to WOPs implementation.

France: A dedicated HR structure for decentralised cooperation, SIAAP. To carry out the more than forty international projects in twenty countries currently in its portfolio, SIAAP has acquired appropriate resources: while the Commission for Decentralized Cooperation and International Relations selects and monitors the progress of cooperation projects, SIAAP agents form a team of engaged field experts. In addition to a team dedicated to international activities, SIAAP created the Directorate of Communication and International Relations (DCRI) and recruited professionals in decentralised cooperation. There are different members of the team, including a lawyer specialising in international relations, an expert in project management for urban infrastructure in developing countries and/or a specialist in intercultural human relations management. Additionally, support comes from engineers, cartographers, laboratory technicians, and more than 20 agents who, on a voluntary basis, contribute time and expertise ad hoc basis to projects led by the DCRI.

A group of several operators for a WOP can multiply skills and spread the workload. It is also a way for sharing examples of best practice and expertise between operators, which is equally as beneficial for mentors as it is for mentees.

Thanks to Aqua Publica Europea's (APE) inputs to the participatory conceptualization of the new EU-WOP Programme, the new European programme allows for multi-operator cooperation. Cooperation between operators from the same country is being established among APE members (e.g., Belgium and Italy), with the effect of pooling resources and overcoming difficulties. There is a large reserve of skills within this network that can be

mobilised in a peer-to-peer, non-profit approach, in an exchange of best practice. Established in 2005 by Dutch water operators, Vitens - Evides International (VEI) has developed into an effective organisation that is implementing WOPs with dozens of water operators worldwide. VEI is a full subsidiary of Vitens N.V. and Evides N.V. and implements their international Corporate Social Responsibility policy on behalf of seven Dutch drinking water partners (Vitens N.V.; Evides Waterbedrijf N.V.; WML; Waterbedrijf Groningen; Brabant Water; WLN; PWN). This organisation employs a team of twenty staff members at its headquarters in Utrecht and engages the project staff members worldwide according to the needs of the projects and the financing programs raised. In addition, for short term assignments, VEI arranges another two hundred employees of Dutch water operators to provide support to peer operators for improvement in operational and financial performance. It charges the cost of this dedicated assistance to the project budget. They capacitate hundreds of employees in their partner water utilities and every year help directly and indirectly hundreds of thousands of people with improved access to water services, mostly from low-income areas in Africa, Asia and South America.

Water policy decisions can impact other sectors, utilities, and public policies. The extension of the partnership to other subjects beyond water and sanitation, (e.g., energy, biodiversity, etc.) is a factor in the long-term consolidation of these partnerships.

2.2.2. Project Management Assistance: a Key Factor in Facilitating WOPs

The conditions for supporting the partnership are at least as important as its financing. Operators want to focus on their core business and not be in charge of activities outside of their areas of expertise to implement WOPs.

To create a WOP-friendly context, one of the conditions for mentor operators is to reduce the administrative burden (e.g., preparing proposals, identifying funding, logistical organizing, monitoring activities and reporting, etc.) which accompany the implementation of WOPs. They generally do not have the time or specialized skills for this type of work. According to testimonies and feedback provided by the operators, this is the source of many operators' reluctance to engage in WOPs. They are not well prepared to manage these types of administrative tasks which are not related to their core business. Yet many do not know where to turn for additional support and advice in the preparation of their application.

Observations from those working in this area:

- Some operators outsource proposal writing assistance to an external party, but the cost for this must be offset by the grant/funding received for the project, which is not always possible. This approach tends to favour large operators and those accustomed to engaging in such procedures which does not help to bring in new entrants to WOPs.

- In an ideal framework for enabling WOPs, all bureaucratic procedures would be handled by staff other than the operators, allowing operators to focus on technical aspects. In concrete terms, it means that a “WOPs facilitator” would look after the administrative tasks instead of burdening utilities involved in a WOP. This facilitator could be an NGO or other type of actor with experience and reach in international cooperation.

The SDEA (Syndicat des Eaux et de l'Assainissement Alsace-Moselle) is involved in several international partnerships, and has developed a very specific partnership model, which has proven itself over time. The model benefits from the external support of GESCOD (Grand Est Solidarités et Coopérations pour le Développement), a local association which undertakes the essential role of project management assistance, acting as an interface for all administrative, legal, and financial matters, liaising with local actors and partners to set up and monitor the project.

In Amsterdam, international cooperation is enabled by an original institutional collaboration between a public water operator and its dedicated foundation.

World Waternet is a non-profit organisation founded by Waternet, the public water utility covering Amsterdam and surrounding areas, and is dedicated to improving sustainable access to clean, sufficient and safe water for all. World Waternet supports public water utilities through peer-to-peer knowledge exchange in water cycle management through long-term WOPs in more than fifteen countries in Africa, Asia and South America in order to strengthen capacity, improve performance and enable them to provide a better service. They have a project-based staffing agreement with Waternet, which allows Waternet employees to contribute to its projects.

Another model to facilitate WOPs in the water sector is the specific platform Programme Solidarité Eau (pS-Eau). Originally intended to be a Europe-wide initiative, to date it has only been implemented in France. pS-Eau is a network supporting French decentralised cooperation and non-governmental actors (e.g., local authorities, associations, operators, etc.) in water and sanitation international cooperation. On account of both its experience as network facilitator and its particular support methodology, pS-Eau supports French decentralised cooperation in the water and sanitation sector and helps improve the quality and rigor of its interventions.

pS-Eau is a non-profit organisation created by the French government in 1984 that became an independent association in 2000. pS-Eau fosters the sharing of experiences and information between all stakeholders working within the French water and sanitation sectors. Its four main objectives are: mobilising French local authorities on the issue; monitoring and

assessment of the funding and the projects carried out; supporting and guiding the design and implementation of projects; and promoting the international action of local authorities in water and sanitation.

This facilitation model could be developed and scaled up. Furthermore, there could be value in widening the approach to allow partners to reap the full benefit of the accumulated experience of such platforms, in particular by developing an assistance role to support the operators in the design, presentation and communication of their WOPs projects.

2.3. Supportive Legal and Institutional Frameworks for WOPs

The role of central and local governments in creating legal frameworks that enable WOPs is critical. Depending on the political and cultural contexts, the institutional frameworks for international cooperation vary greatly from country to country.

Over the past fifteen years, several European countries and regions have passed laws or made legal provisions that enable local and regional authorities and water institutions, including water utilities, to dedicate a fraction of their turnover to international cooperation: the so-called “1% laws”. The model has since proven successful in mobilising localised sources of funding, and putting it to use by leveraging the vast local capital of human knowledge, technical expertise and management skills toward solidarity-based cooperation initiatives. For instance, such laws have enabled the Netherlands and France to be the most active WOPs mentors worldwide.

France: Since 1992, a law on decentralisation allows French local authorities to finance development cooperation projects from their general budget. This allows for the targeting of local authorities in the South with whom they have official cooperation agreements. In 2005, France went even further, providing a specific tool for actions carried out in the water and sanitation sector. The Oudin-Santini Law enables local authorities and water agencies to voluntarily dedicate up to 1% of their water and sanitation budget to cooperation actions in the sector. Boosted by this law, French local authorities, utilities and water agencies are involved to varying degrees in promoting access to water and sanitation in developing countries at one of the highest levels amongst European countries. There is no doubt that this specific legal framework has encouraged many water operators to take action by increasing their capacity to manage and monitor projects, allowing them to focus more on their own specific areas of expertise: public service management, collaboration between authorities, water resources management and development plans etc.

More recently, in 2019, Germany and Finland launched their own national WOPs programs which will add new experience and results to the European WOPs practice.

Image

Mr. Olli-Matti Verta, Ministerial Adviser at the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland, during an interview with GWOPA/UN-Habitat, expressed that initiative has already been made to the Finnish government about establishing a law that would help fund decentralized cooperation, similar to "1% laws" existing in other European countries such as the Netherlands and France. Finland recently launched a WOP pilot initiative © Mr. Olli-Matti Verta.

Finland: A national WOP programme supported by the Government of Finland. In 2020 Finland prepared a national WOP initiative with a funding instrument from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, which is responsible for water and wastewater utilities. The pilot for 2020-2022 provides for a maximum allocation of €100,000 per WOP, plus self-contributions from the water utilities. In addition to WOPs with partners in developing countries, the instrument provides some possibilities for mentoring collaborations with other Nordic countries. Should the piloting phase be successful there are possibilities for a longer-term mechanism. The Finnish Water Utilities Association has also drafted a proposal to introduce a "1% law" in Finland. This development would make of Finland the third European country with a law for decentralised water cooperation and it would provide a relevant framework to expand the WOP practice that Finland is piloting.

Germany: German utilities are bound by a law that prohibits local water tariffs from being used outside the customer area/watershed. This means that a German utility wanting to mentor a partner elsewhere needs to recover the cost of any staff time dedicated to the partnership. Since 2019, encouraged by the increasing interest and demand from German water utilities, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and Engagement Global with its Service Agency Communities in One World (SKEW) have been implementing the pilot project "Utility platform for strengthening partnerships of municipal utilities worldwide" as a cooperation project on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation (BMZ). The utility platform is a pilot effort to get more German utilities involved in WOPs and implemented in cooperation with the German Association of Local Utilities (VKU) and the German Water Partnership (GWP). The federal funding allocated to this programme allows participating utilities to be reimbursed for staff time dedicated to the partnerships.

In some other cases, national and local laws can limit the engagement of water utilities in international cooperation activities. Some countries like Belgium and Germany are making efforts to address the absence of a favourable legal provision by initiating national WOP programs with governmental funding or by establishing dedicated funds.

The Belgian Technical Cooperation (CTB) implements the cooperation programs signed by Belgium. As such, it is called upon to carry out aid activities in the water and sanitation sector. Within the framework of this international action, CTB has decided to rely on the expertise of SWDE for the production, distribution, and management of water resources, and SPGE for wastewater treatment. Conversely, for their own projects, the two operators from Walloon will be able to rely on the networks and resources already established by the Belgian Cooperation in the countries concerned.

The experience of European countries that have adopted specific laws and frameworks supporting WOPs can serve as inspiration to others whose laws currently constrain or limit water utilities from participating in WOPs programs. A number of good examples of WOPs implemented using these mechanisms show the potential for replication in other European countries. National governments and policymakers could elevate the debate to a European level to promote the use of WOPs and solidarity-based partnerships in EU development projects. A European framework could be used to influence the revision and adaptation of existing national legislation which prevents public, regional or local institutions, including municipal water services and utilities, from participating in international cooperation projects such as WOPs where financial or in-kind support are requested.

In the absence of a favourable legal framework, policymakers could propose alternative initiatives and programs that include external financing to enable municipal utilities to engage in WOPs.

The ideal scheme needs a coherent strategy at different levels, from national to local, to support WOPs programs. Such an approach should value local expertise in the water and sanitation sector and involve all stakeholders to ensure there is a coordinated approach towards a national contribution to the international cooperation agenda. In the Netherlands, such a multi-tiered strategy has led them to become very active in the field of international water cooperation. The WOP initiative WaterWorX was launched in 2017 by the Government of The Netherlands and the Dutch water sector. It stands out in building and strengthening the capacity of local mentee operators to make lasting improvements for increasing access to sustainable water services.

The Netherlands: WaterWorX (WWX). In a public-private collaboration (2017-2030) involving the Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs and their local partner companies in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the ten Dutch water companies (Vitens, Evides Water company, WML, Water company Groningen, Brabant Water, PWN, Oasen, Dunea, Waternet and WMD) will use WOPs to contribute to improving operation and maintenance of local water companies and improve their financial and administrative systems. In particular, they will improve financing

large-scale investments in water infrastructure making it possible to connect large numbers of people to water and sanitation. WaterWorX aims to increase sustainable access to drinking water for 10 million people by 2030. To further increase the impact, the program has adopted a sector-wide approach aimed at strengthening the enabling environment and obtaining political support for change in a number of countries. In Phase 1 (2017-2021), the Dutch utilities established WOPs with 39 water utilities in Africa and Asia. Phase 2 (2022-2026) will have a stronger emphasis on the DGIS (Directorate-General for International Cooperation) focus regions, which has already resulted in adding several new partner utilities and the phasing out others.

Besides the necessary legal support, the success of a WOP lies in involving all the stakeholders on the ground, at the political, institutional, technical and civil society levels to create a conducive context.

The involvement in a WOP of development cooperation agencies that finance the necessary infrastructure is particularly relevant.

Enabel (Belgian Development agency) played the role of facilitator in a WOP between SWDE (Société wallonne des eaux) and ASUREP (Associations des Usagers de Réseaux d'Eau Potable) of Kasai Oriental and Maniema in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Within the framework of a decentralised and participatory approach, the government of the DRC supports the development of users' associations which manage water supply infrastructures for the benefit of consumers. The WOP aims to strengthen methodological and operational capacity building of ASUREP and to extend and consolidate the management of drinking water supply systems (improving governance, billing, and day-to-day technical management). The WOP partners work together in synergy with Enabel during the start-up phase of the project to ensure an efficient transmission of the project's factual elements, and continue involvement until the end of its water program (June 2022). The motivation for Enabel is to capitalise on the experience acquired during the project by adding the expertise of two major operators in the water and professional training sector in Belgium (SWDE and FOREM, Walloon Office for Vocational Training and Employment).

Another recommendation is to involve local NGOs and Civil society organizations on both sides of a WOP who can help facilitate the setting up and execution of the project, beyond the roles and reach of the mentor and the mentee utility.

Spain: Building an alliance of local authorities and stakeholders. Alianza por el Agua was created in Spain to bring together different stakeholders in the water sector. The central government, local authorities, water utilities, social organisations, and research and analysis institutes in Central America and Spain collaborate within this alliance to work together for

the right to access water and sanitation. The principal activities of the Alliance, as specified by consensus among all its members, are awareness-raising, sharing of knowledge and training, and the implementation of small innovative pilot infrastructure projects. This type of multi-stakeholder alliance is essential to mobilise and channel political will either at a national or local level.

Since socio-cultural contexts are usually very different between mentees and the mentors, it is relevant to broaden the scope and include other actors in the field. These additional actors can aid in putting the partnership in relevant socio-economic and socio-political contexts, to facilitate and maximize the impact of WOPs.

2.4. Funding WOPs

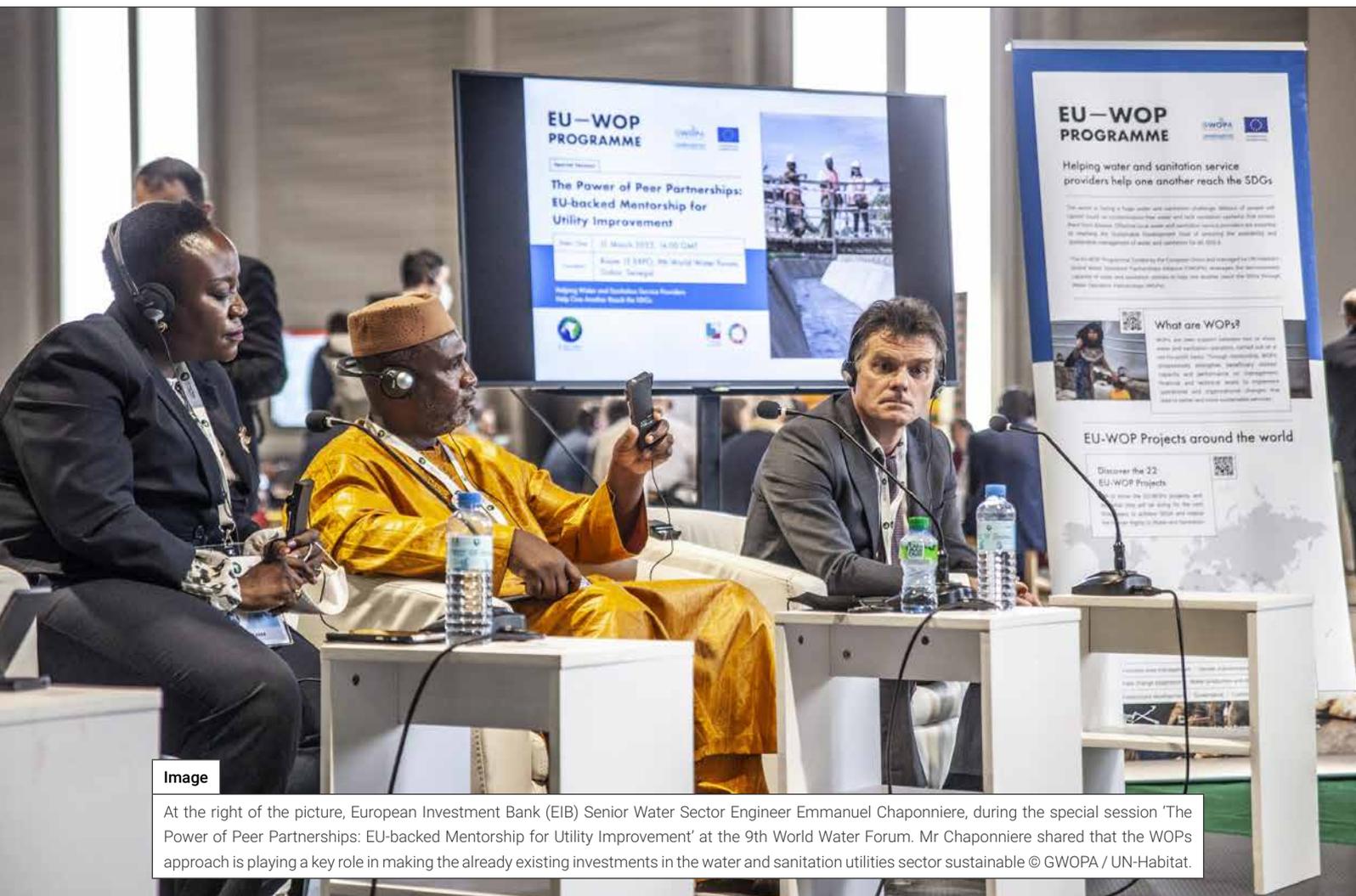
Beyond the funding derived from the application of decentralisation and solidarity laws which exist in several countries, European WOPs have benefited from a variety of funding mechanisms and financial opportunities from sources such as bilateral and multilateral donors, development agencies and regional development banks. These additional mechanisms represent a tremendous potential for the growth of WOPs in Europe. Donors and finance institutions are, in many cases, the only viable sources of support for substantial infrastructure investment where this is a necessary.

Some notable examples of financial collaboration and mechanisms found in Europe to support WOPs:

- The Flemish Partnership Water for Development (Het Vlaams Partnerschap Water voor Ontwikkeling (VPWvO)) and the Walloon International Fund for Solidarity for Water Funding in Belgium, the National WOP programme funded by the Government of Germany, Acqua Bene Comune and Solidarietà a Torino in Italy, WaterAid in UK, etc.
- In Spain, bilateral cooperation led to the implementation of a multi-million Euro financial instrument to support the development of the water and sanitation sector in Latin America through the Spanish Water Fund and the Spanish Cooperation and Development Agency (AECID). WOPs have complemented this governmental action by mobilising cities and utilities to develop capacity through decentralised cooperation.
- The French Development Agency (AFD) supported a 3-year WOP programme (2012-2015) implemented through GWOPA/UN-Habitat to enhance the sustainability of their infrastructure development projects and to develop the capacity of the beneficiary water and sanitation utilities. Through these WOPs, a number of French municipalities were involved in a tripartite model of cooperation: centralised, decentralised and multilateral.
- The Dutch Government pioneered the WOP practice in Europe by testing the efficiency of long-term partnerships between Dutch water utilities and their peer utilities in the Global South. More recently, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs has granted funds for the second phase of the WaterWorX programme (2022-2026). The first stage had a budget of €54 million, of which 55 percent was

funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and 45 percent funded by a combination of the Dutch and local water utilities. It focuses, amongst other things, on long-term partnerships and sustainability with linkages to large-scale investments in water infrastructure.

- Special consideration is also given to the WOP initiatives of the EU which continue to enable the most significant and long-term contribution to the WOPs practice in the world. As already mentioned, the EU was instrumental in funding and scaling up the European WOP practice through the ACP-EU Water Facility. The new EU WOP program is an important instrument for strengthening utilities' financial sustainability and facilitating access to finance for service improvements or extensions. In this context, and given that one of the main objectives is to boost the capacity of public utilities beyond the duration of the partnership by making sustainable improvements, it is appropriate that the EU's WOP program be renewable and long-term.



Image

At the right of the picture, European Investment Bank (EIB) Senior Water Sector Engineer Emmanuel Chaponniere, during the special session 'The Power of Peer Partnerships: EU-backed Mentorship for Utility Improvement' at the 9th World Water Forum. Mr Chaponniere shared that the WOPs approach is playing a key role in making the already existing investments in the water and sanitation utilities sector sustainable © GWOPA / UN-Habitat.

Alongside these more traditional models, other examples of financial mechanisms exist, such as the establishment of solidarity funds and charity fundraising. Voluntary contributions have also proven to be a valuable and solid source of funding for WOPs. Many small-scale WOPs are also self-funded by the partner operators.

From these different funding programs, whether national or European, we can draw some recommendations.

- A crucial factor to encourage WOPs is the sustainability of funding mechanisms for operators, a short-term financial support is clearly a disadvantage. The absence of strong prospects for renewed funding over time is undoubtedly a barrier to operators' commitment to these partnerships. This suggests the real need for a perennial European funding program.
- In financing infrastructure projects, make use of WOPs to support proper diagnosis, understanding of investment needs, enhancing follow up and ensuring the capacity for maintenance and sustainable service delivery.
- Fund WOP initiatives that have scale-up potential, e.g., where interventions and investments are likely to enable replication and diffusion of the WOPs practice, for example where a strengthened mentee will go on to support more utilities in turn (ripple effect).
- Develop synergies with multilateral and bilateral development and cooperation agencies to coordinate and maximise financial resources towards the practice of WOPs.
- Recognise that mentor water utilities are engaged in WOPs on a not-for-profit basis and are selected based on evaluation criteria. Accordingly, ensure bidding processes do not put utilities in competition with commercial service providers.
- Use WOPs in complementary to traditional technical assistance. Do not seek to equate to traditional assistance but build on its unique strengths: focus on capacity development, learning between peer professionals and workers, and solidarity.

Several success stories show that a joint approach, combining WOPs' capacity development focus with investment in infrastructure, is beneficial. Conversely, in some cases the lack of investment accompanying a WOP can limit the application and anchoring of newly acquired capacity. Improved capacity building increases the impact and sustainability of investments. WOPs do not occur in isolation, so any combination of hard and soft investments from the operator, as well as external donor funding, will be used to improve or expand their operations. Donors are particularly interested in seeing how WOPs can generate sustainability from their investments, so evidence of an operator's successes have the potential to attract future finance.

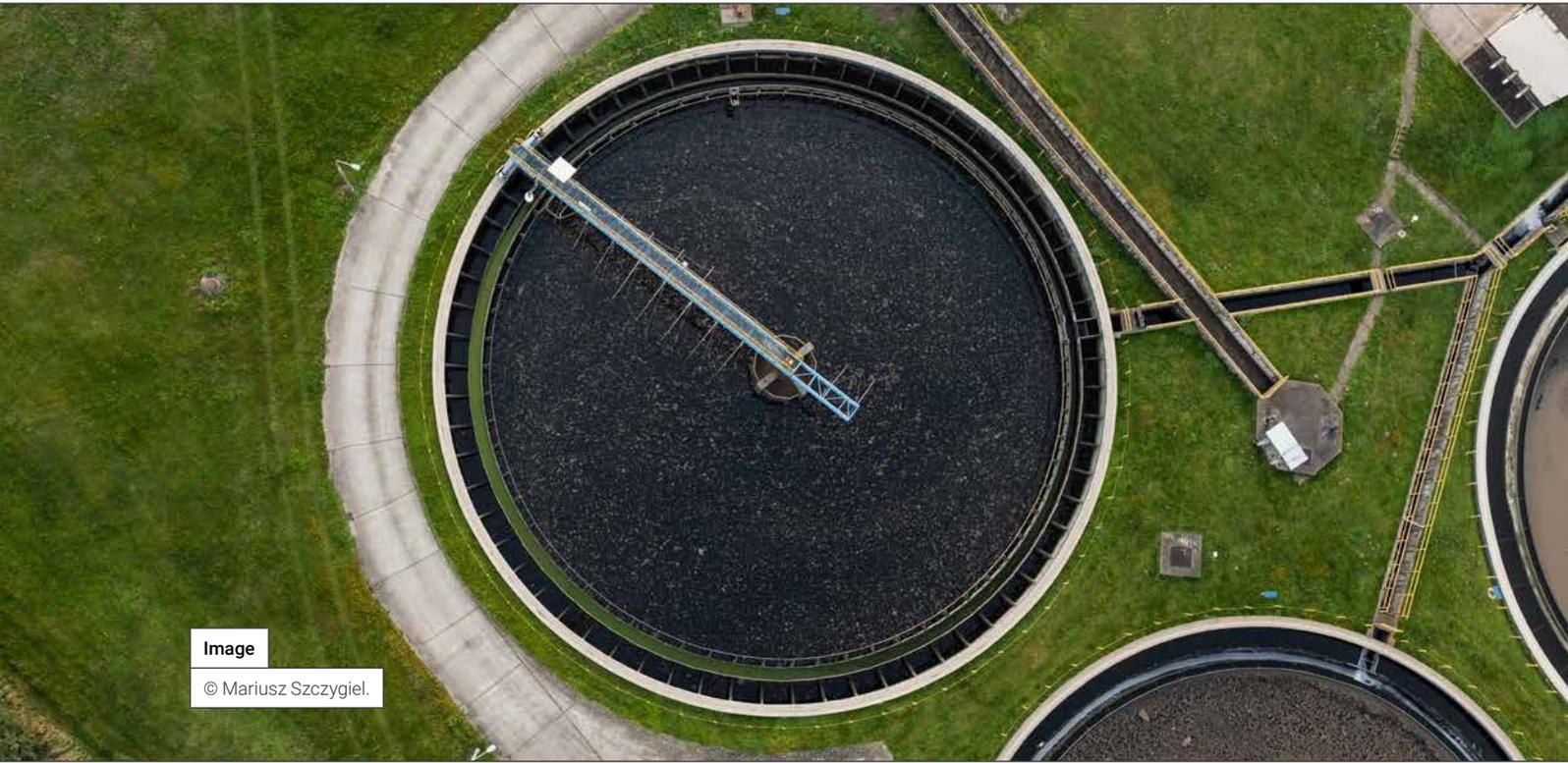
2.5. Increase International Recognition and Visibility

The inclusion of water and sanitation issues is a priority on the UN agenda which should enhance the involvement of both states and local authorities in these peer-to-peer technical partnerships. It is at the local level and often through the work of local institutions like water operators, that global sustainability agendas are realized. To encourage national and local actors to become more involved, the efforts of local and governmental institutions to fulfil their international development commitments (e.g., SDGs goals, etc.) must be recognised and awarded.

To encourage the uptake of WOPs in support of the local realization of the SDGs, GWOPA could create a labelling system to identify, support and promote WOPs. It would be a way to recognise and value the essential role of local operators in achieving the international agenda goals and emphasising their contribution via the WOPs program to not only the Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, but also the New Urban Agenda, the Paris Climate Agenda, and the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation. It would be a source of pride for both the operators and the local and/or national governments who would see their expertise and know-how recognised as a result of this labelling approach.

In addition to providing rewarding recognition, there is a need to improve the visibility of WOPs. A major dissemination and communication effort is needed to raise awareness of WOPs programs among UN agencies, cooperating agencies, operators, and across all political levels. This must be accompanied by documentation highlighting the benefits and achievements of these partnerships.

It is essential to more widely showcase the results achieved through WOPs. Information material and communication campaigns must reach a wider audience, not just insiders. These should highlight the advantages of these partnerships by documenting and recording successful partnership experiences through reports, stories, interviews, and videos. This wealth of knowledge about WOPs will be useful in training and inspiring other utilities. There is an opportunity for utilities to capitalize on the results achieved by WOPs for recognition, reputation and further motivation for staff to engage in WOPs.



Image

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Conclusion

The WOP mechanism has proven effective at enabling utilities to improve service delivery with relatively limited funding, through the application of a bottom-up process. WOPs value for money, long-term sustainability benefits, ability to mobilise local human resources and create awareness on critical water and sanitation issues have been documented and demonstrated. With increased duration and scope, WOPs results stretch from simple capacity building to operational change, to performance improvements that make contributions to global development frameworks. The organisation and support of partnerships between utilities present one of the best ways to improve and extend basic water and sanitation services worldwide. European operators have a key role to play in this regard given the tremendous potential for the growth of the WOPs practice in Europe. This potential can be harnessed by building on the successful experience of several European countries, regions, and cities with WOPs.

WOPs need to be scaled up, and to achieve this, the practice of WOPs must become better known and more widely recognised, trusted by the relevant technical, financial and political actors, and viewed as a cost-effective mechanism for improving services delivery and access to water and sanitation for all.

To advance the already active WOPs movement in Europe and scale up the practice of WOPs worldwide, each stakeholder group needs to play its role in creating an enabling environment for WOPs. This entails seeking a strong and long-lasting political support and commitment, identifying clear political motivations for change, passing progressive laws and regulations that support decentralised cooperation mechanisms, increasing long-term funding resources, further engaging with customers and civil society, and ensuring human and organisational backing of the WOPs.

The lessons that can be drawn from the experiences in the field highlight the need and opportunities for more ambitious WOPs policies in Europe.

Enabling WOPs: Mobilizing European Actors for Solidarity-based Water Partnerships

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