

A Concept Note on Water Operators' Partnerships contributions to the Protocol on Water and Health

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The following concept note introduces Water Operators' Partnerships and explains how they can be applied by signatories to the UNECE-WHO Protocol on Water and Health in fulfilling their commitments under the Protocol.

Introduction to Water Operators' Partnerships

Public water and sanitation operators have a major role to play in efforts to achieve the water and sanitation related MDG targets and realize the Right to Water. Water operators also have a significant influence on the water cycle through their activities, impacting water quality and quantity and, consequently, human and ecosystem health.

Many operators are in need of support. They suffer from weak management approaches, inadequate resources, and deteriorating infrastructure that make universal service provision challenging to achieve and nearly impossible to sustain. Their capacity to address these challenges is marred by poor governance, ineffective institutional frameworks, and capacity shortcomings. On top of that, demands on operators are growing. In many areas, including parts of Europe, urban growth is outpacing the ability of utilities to extend their services, putting operators face to face with a widening scope of environmental, financial and social challenges.

Water Operators' Partnerships –WOPs – are peer support arrangements between two or more water and sanitation operators, carried out on a not-for-profit basis in the objective of strengthening their capacity. WOPs are being encouraged as a low-cost and effective mode of bolstering the ability of these essential public service providers to play their full role in meeting the Millennium Development Goals and delivering on the Right to Water and Sanitation. Water Operators' Partnerships (WOPs) help water operators transfer their knowledge to their peers in order to raise their overall level of performance, for the betterment of the poor. WOPs are based on the observation that capacity building and retention, facilitated by networking and mentoring, can equip operators to meet the challenges facing the sector. It also draws on the fact that much of the innovation and expertise to address water operators' challenges reside with operators themselves, and that a growing number of these successful operators are highly motivated to share their expertise and innovation with others as “mentors” on a not-for-profit basis.

Creating a global mechanism to promote WOPs was a key action of the United Nations Secretary General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation (UNSGAB)'s “Hashimoto Action Plan,” launched in Mexico in March 2006. UN-Habitat was asked to lead this effort, and in 2007 it established the Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance (GWOPA) to bring together the efforts and resources of partners around the world - public water and sanitation operators and their associations, development partners, civil society organizations, private operators and labour unions - committed to using WOPs to improve their collective capacity to provide access to water and sanitation for all.

GWOPA helps make WOPs more common and more impactful by matching operators with appropriate skills, supporting design and identifying financial backing for partnerships, and by sharing lessons on good practice and advocating for the approach.

Water Operators' Partnerships in South East Europe

While the Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance (GWOPA) was created to connect, support and scale up WOPs efforts worldwide, regional platforms help operators within a region to exchange and learn with one another, and to serve as a launching pad for partnership with operators further afield. Regional WOPs platforms are currently active in WOPs implementation in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Arab Countries and South East Europe. National platforms are also active in Brazil, Mexico and Pakistan.

The WOP platform for South East Europe (WOP-SEE) was instigated at a UN Secretary General's Advisory Board meeting in Bulgaria in 2009, where South East European water ministers expressed their support to join the global WOPs movement and establish a platform to facilitate partnerships in the sub-region. Supported by UN-Habitat, it brings together professionals, utilities, associations and any actors in the region interested in using not-for profit partnerships to support South East Europe's public utilities.

The vision of the WOP-SEE platform is to significantly increase the capacity of operators to provide sustainable access to water and sanitation for all in the SEE Region. The platform promotes, adds value to, and connects efforts in order to make WOPs more common and more effective.

Though currently focused on the countries of South East Europe, the platform aims to draw on the support of Western and Northern European countries, and progressively move its support into the countries of Central Asia.

WOPs and the Protocol on Water and Health

Water and sanitation operators have direct bearing on water and health linkages with activities that impact heavily on water quality and quantity, and human and ecosystem wellbeing. By the way that they extract, deliver, treat and dispose of water and wastewater resources, operators can significantly contribute to – or impede - efforts carried out in support of the Protocol on Water and Health.

Specifically, water and sanitation operators influence achievement of country-level Protocol targets related to:

- drinking water quality
- reduction of water-related diseases
- performance of water supply and sanitation systems
- protection of water resources for drinking

The Value of Solidarity-Based Partnerships

Water Operators' Partnerships are low-cost because they are carried out on a solidarity basis. This means that mentor operators provide their support on a not-for-profit basis and without business development motives. Mentor operators from European countries and elsewhere have found that engaging in WOPs has long-term payback in terms of helping them retain high quality staff (who see WOPs as an exciting challenge and career development opportunity) and as a Corporate Social Responsibility endeavor. In some cases, salary costs are compensated for, and in most cases, travel costs are covered by external donors.

- management of wastewater, and
- prevention, control and clean-up of pollution

Water Operators' Partnerships offer a mechanism for building the capacity of operators to make their full contribution to the fulfillment of country-level commitments under the Protocol. Through WOPs, operators with knowledge, skills and experience implementing improvements related to Protocol targets will provide support and mentorship to operators in need. Mentor operators can support their peers in the identification of Protocol-related influences, benchmarking of performance, and the development and implementation of performance improvement plans that include reinforcing the staff capacity required to sustain improvements.

At the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol held in Bucharest in November, 2010, UN-HABITAT, through its WOP-SEE platform, committed to supporting the work of the Protocol via its Equitable Access and Small-scale Service Providers working areas. The following elaborates on how Water Operators' Partnerships could concretely contribute to advancing Protocol achievements in these areas.

Equitable Access

While it contains many of the world's wealthiest countries, the pan-European region is also home to nearly 110 million people without access to safe drinking water and it is estimated that 13,000 children under the age of 14 die every year in the region from water-related diarrhea.

Inequality in service access is played out spatially and socially, between countries as well as within them. While access is far lower in Eastern Europe and Central Asia than in Western and Northern Europe, many rural areas experience deplorable water and sanitation conditions compared with their urban counterparts within the same borders. Within a given service area, it is the poor and marginalized who have the least access to quality basic services.

Water Operators' Partnerships can help operators provide more equitable access by supporting them to deliver explicitly pro-poor service, or by building their capacity to deliver overall better and more sustainable service that will eventually lead to better provision for the poor. In a broader sense, WOPs also help reduce inequality by lowering the knowledge disparities between operators.

WOPs focused on Expanding access to Low-Income Households

While all WOPs should contribute to increasing service access levels, some do so more directly.

A short-term WOP between Kuala Lumpur's Indah Water Konsortium Sdn. and Indonesia's PDAM Tirtanadi Medan led to more than 300 new connections to the sewer system in its first 6 months, and 4000 within two years. The WOP helped Medan develop and carry out a sanitation demand programme which led to greater awareness and readiness of the public to connect to the sewerage system and pay fees.

WOPs to support Small Scale Service Providers – Examples from Kenya and Chile

The Federación Nacional de Cooperativas de Servicios Sanitarios de Chile helped the Cooperative Sanitation Operator of Maule to rehabilitate and improve its wastewater stabilization pond system in Maule by implementing innovative technologies in the field of low-cost ecological sanitation, taking into consideration the whole integrated water cycle. The WOP focused on non-conventional technologies for wastewater treatment. The partners built capacity in assessing eco-sanitation alternatives and recommending the most viable technical solution for withstanding vulnerability to earthquakes.

In Kenya, the small public water operator in Thika is being supported by the National Water and Sewerage Corporation of Uganda to prepare and implement a performance improvement plan focusing on reduction of non revenue water and improving its commercial operations. The WOP will result in the adoption of change management approaches, reduced NRW, and improved financial sustainability.

GWOPA, like the Protocol, is resituating its work as a contribution to the realization of the UNGA Declaration on the Right to Water, which among other things implies greater explicit focus on the most vulnerable segments of the population. Though still in drafting, the Sustainable Development Goals that will follow the MDGs after 2015, are likely to include targets that aim to specifically advance access for the lowest income quartiles. GWOPA is interested in being involved in helping operators make and monitor progress towards such new targets.

The Protocol has documented many good practices in equitable service provision and delivering on the Right to Water in its publication “No One Left Behind.” GWOPA could support the scale-up of these good practices by facilitating exposure visits and practical peer support between operators who have successfully implemented work to improve service provision equality and those committed to doing so. GWOPA could also play a role in identifying, documenting, discussing and sharing further operator-led innovations to removing affordability, social or physical barriers to access.

Small-scale Service Providers

Access challenges in the pan-European region are encountered overwhelmingly in the rural areas and small or peri-urban centres of Eastern European and Central Asia. The prevalence of water-related illness in these communities has made supporting the capacity development of small scale public water supply and sanitation service providers a major focus of the Protocol work programme.

Sanitation is a persistent problem in many of the rural areas of Central Asia and Eastern Europe where untreated sewage pollutes waters that are relied upon for drinking. Under the EU Water Directive Framework, communities with more than 2000 inhabitants are required to have in place appropriate wastewater treatment facilities.

UN-Habitat, through its Water Operators’ Partnerships, can contribute to the Small Community Water Supply Management (SCWSM) network by supporting WOPs that target these smaller operators. WOPs focused on small water and sanitation operators could be carried out with similarly-scaled peers from other European countries particularly those with experience in appropriate decentralized technologies, or intra-nationally, with the support of larger operators from within the same country. Partnerships could enable the exchange

of recognized best practices or help peers collectively innovative solutions to address common challenges. Small scale WOPs and peer exchange could further support the sharing and uptake of good practices and technologies, by equipping small operators with the practical skills needed to build, operate and maintain effective decentralized sanitation and treatment facilities, as well as promoting better hygiene practices amongst the community.

UN-Habitat, through the WOP-SEE, could back the SCWSM Network's efforts in this area by helping further disseminate and encourage the use of its tools to improve the management of small community water supplies and sanitation operators.

Water Safety Planning

The Water Safety Planning (WSP) framework is being adopted by more and more water operators as a means of ensuring safe drinking water supplies. Water Safety Planning is a readily transmissible approach as it can be locally-adapted and applied by operators at different scales, regardless of the environmental or socioeconomic context. The WHO Manual for Water Safety Planning in Small Community Water Supply provides clear guidance for the scale of operators that need most to be supported in protecting their water supplies in Europe and Central Asia. Water Operators' Partnerships could build on this manual by supporting operators to incorporate WSP processes.

In other regions of the world, GWOPA has led training on WSPs, and used WOPs to follow up on their implementation. In support of the protocol, beginning in South East Europe, GWOPA could facilitate a similar approach to training and peer support in translating the manual into action.

As the Water and Health Working Group pushes for the establishment of National frameworks for WSPs, GWOPA could offer its services in helping to roll out the process at country level.

Electronic Communications Platform: Tools for Brokering, Sharing and Networking

GWOPA hosts an on-line communications platform that facilitates information and knowledge sharing on water and sanitation operator topics, and allows peer operators and professionals to connect with one another.

The platform has distinct functionality to facilitate the following types of activities under the Protocol:

- Database of WOPs Profiles which provide snapshots of peer support activities around the world. These profiles serve to learn about how WOPs work and inspire.
- Operator Profiles – the operators' profiles are where operators under the protocol can share basic information about their services, performance practices and express their interest in participating in a WOP. The operators' profiles enable potential partners to identify one another online.
- The Pipeline in GWOPA's social networking platform,

WOPs and Water Safety Planning

In Africa, the Arab Countries and Latin America and the Caribbean, GWOPA has helped lead WSP training for operators, in collaboration with WHO, IWA, CAP-Net and regional partners. In Africa, GWOPA led a series of small WOPs that allowed trained water safety planners to learn from successful WSP implementers in order to advance their own plans.

which allows direct exchange between water and sanitation utility professionals. The pipeline enables professionals to create groups and forums to engage with one another around specific topics.

- Resources – the resource library hosts a variety of open-source documents of interest to water and sanitation operators. It can also be used to gather and share tools and guidance on a wide range of technical topics.

Solidarity through the Protocol

Water Operators' Partnerships present an opportunity to signatory countries of the Protocol on Water and Health to act in solidarity with one another for the collective fulfillment of the commitments. In a region of extensively trans-boundary waters, international WOPs are a constructive way of working towards shared improvements.

Implementing WOPs under the Protocol

This brief note has raised a number of opportunities for Water Operators' Partnerships and the related activities of the WOP-SEE platform to contribute to the implementation of the Protocol on Water and Health. The WOP-SEE platform is currently seeking core funding with which to support WOPs on a competitive needs basis, however without such funds, WOP-SEE cannot fund WOPs directly, but can provide support to parties wishing to employ a WOPs approach in seeking needed funds. The potential WOPs contribution to the protocol and whether additional funds would be required to implement, are summarized as follows:

Summary of Potential WOPs Contributions under Protocol on Water and Health		Funds Required?
Equitable Access	WOPs to improve access via <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Comprehensive WOPs – which improve service quality and sustainability mostly through efficiency improvements - Through direct pro-poor interventions that target the most needy groups directly 	Yes
	Supporting operators in monitoring equity and implementing equity improvements in service provision	yes
	Helping develop and consolidate knowledge base on operators' role in realizing the Right to Water	no
Small Scale Water and Sanitation Service Providers	WOPs targeting small scale providers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - of water or sanitation services - through internationally or intra-national WOPs - building on the SCWSP Network knowledge 	yes
	Water Safety Planning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training - Small scale WSP-themed WOPs 	yes
Communications Platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - WOPs Database - Operators Database - Resources Database - Pipeline for Networking 	no

For the activities requiring additional funding, the WOP-SEE secretariat can offer the following services to help generate the interest and/or support required to make them possible:

- Helping Member States identify how WOPs could contribute to their commitments under the Protocol
- Provide technical support for project generation and WOPs proposal preparation
- Identification of appropriate partners and design partnerships
- Helping identify financing to carry out WOPs

- Providing tools and guidance for WOPs implementation, monitoring and evaluation
- Advocating for and communicating about partnerships
- Linking and adding value to ongoing WOPs efforts as well as regional projects on water and wastewater in the region

How Member States can Get Involved

Parties to the Protocol are invited to explicitly call for Water Operators' Partnerships and do what they can at country level to enable them. Specifically:

Member States Requiring Support are encouraged to:

- Recognize the essential role of water and sanitation operators in the fulfillment of commitments under the protocol
- Acknowledge and work to address the capacity gaps that prevent operators from fully contributing to protocol targets
- Establish political directives that call for a cooperative approach to operator capacity building
- Encourage water operators to engage with GWOPA by becoming a member and registering their profile.
- Seek the support of WOP-SEE in identifying and pursuing WOPs opportunities¹

Member States with Support to offer are encouraged to:

- Commit ODA funds to supporting Water Operators Partnerships with other countries under the protocol
- Introduce legislation to enable Decentralized Solidarity Mechanisms that give municipalities the right to generate local funds for direct international municipal cooperation
- Identify willing WOPs mentors and encourage them to engage with WOP-SEE or the Global WOPs Alliance (GWOPA)
- Channel their support through the WOP-SEE regional mechanism

What Does a Water Operators' Partnership look like?

Time frame	varies from 6 months to several years. Most WOPs last 1-2 years
Themes	WOPs have covered a wide range of performance topics from water loss reduction to pro-poor service extension. Longer WOPs tend to be more comprehensive and give greater importance to capacity-development, while short WOPs are thematically narrower and action focused.
Outcomes	Range from trained staff, performance improvement plans drafted and implemented to extended service provision.
Partners	WOPs are carried out for the benefit of public operators, however the supporting partner may be either public or private sector operators, provided the WOP is carried out according to WOP principles.
Cost	Depending on the length of the WOP, size of exchange teams and length of exchanges, the cost of WOPs can vary considerably. Under the protocol, WOPs of 25,000-75,000 Euros would be recommended.

CONTACT: info@gwopa.org or see@gwopa.org. www.gwopa.org

¹ Many funds to implement WOPs, for example from the European Union, are available at country level. WOP-SEE could help countries to apply for these funds to carry out WOPs in support of Protocol implementation.