

WATER OPERATOR PARTNERSHIPS

Utility Reform and the Struggle for Alternatives to Privatization

by

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Abstract

The water privatizations that swept across the global South in the 1990s and early 2000s failed to meet expectations. Rather than bringing about increased efficiency and investment, a suite of public-private partnerships ended prematurely and caused social unrest, most notably in the Bolivian city of Cochabamba. In response, scholars and activists embarked on a search for “alternatives to privatization.” Informed by the work of the Municipal Services Project and postneoliberal scholarship, this dissertation examines Water Operator Partnerships (WOPs) as a potential alternative to private-sector engagement in water and sanitation. Relying on primary documents and interviews, I trace the WOP concept to its origins in the UN system and highlight its defining characteristics as a partnership type. I further discuss the struggles behind the concept’s emergence, focusing on the contested role of the private sector and the strategies applied by activists trying to safeguard a public orientation of WOPs. Based on two case studies of water companies in the Netherlands and Uganda, I examine the motivating factors that would cause water operators to engage in WOPs on a not-for-profit basis. My findings indicate that WOPs are driven by a number of interests that call into question their portrayal as solidarity-based partnerships, including staff development and the furthering of opportunities for aid, trade, and investment. I then follow the Dutch and Ugandan companies out of their headquarters and into the field, to the water utility serving Malawi’s capital Lilongwe. Drawing on fieldwork in Malawi, I examine two WOPs in detail, showing how and why these partnerships failed or succeeded in supporting the reduction of non-revenue water. Taken together, this dissertation points to a need to refocus the debate on WOPs, beyond the private sector and towards public water and sanitation operators. I argue that two trends in particular deserve critical attention: professionalization and corporatization. Both are somewhat more concealed and less visible than the outright inclusion of the private sector in WOPs, but they could, in the end, pose a more serious challenge to the WOP model and its postneoliberal potential.

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“Water reflects the world.”

– Maja Lunde, *The End of the Ocean*

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AfWA	African Water Association
BEWOP	Boosting Effectiveness of Water Operators' Partnerships
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DMA	District Metered Area
EIB	European Investment Bank
EU	European Union
GWOPA	Global WOP Alliance
HIPC	Heavily Indebted Poor Countries
HLPW	High-Level Panel on Water
ICSID	International Center for Settlement of Investment Disputes
IDB	Inter-American Development Bank
IFIs	International Financial Institutions
ISC	Integrity Sub-Committee
IWA	International Water Association
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
KMU	Kiosk Management Unit
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LWB	Lilongwe Water Board
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MWK	Malawi Kwacha
NPM	New Public Management
NRW	Non-Revenue Water
NWSC	National Water and Sewerage Corporation
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFID	OPEC Fund for International Development
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
PIP	Performance Improvement Plan
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
PSI	Public Services International

PUP	Public-Public Partnership
RPM	Resident Project Manager
RPWN	Reclaiming Public Water Network
SC	Steering Committee
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TNI	Transnational Institute
UN	United Nations
UNSGAB	UN Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation
VEI	Vitens Evides International
WALOPU	Water Loss Prevention Unit
WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
WOP	Water Operator Partnership
WUA	Water User Association

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Reforming Public Water Utilities in the Global South

In the 1980s, many public water utilities in the global South were in deep trouble. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, public water provision was reportedly “hampered by rigid civil service regulations, inflexible bureaucratic requirements, high costs and lack of incentive to ensure efficiency” (Lewis and Miller, 1987, 71). During the United Nations (UN) International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (1981-1990),¹ there was still a belief that problems in service provision in developing countries could be solved by means of infrastructure and technology. Yet, “the results of the Drinking Water Decade proved disappointing with almost as many people still lacking either clean water or sewerage at the end of the Decade as when the Decade began” (Schwartz, 2008, 49-50).²

For International Financial Institutions (IFIs) such as the World Bank, there was, at the time, a clear solution to the water-related challenges in the global South: the private sector needed to come to the rescue of under-performing public water utilities. To make room for private companies – and the operational efficiencies and financial investments they would supposedly bring – public authorities were expected to step back from direct service provision and instead assume a narrow regulatory role. The idea was “to move the state out of its traditional role as the sole provider of water as a public good, and to implement pricing reforms that seek ... full cost recovery” (Conca, 2006, 221). Governments would no longer act “as a provider of services but as a facilitator,” making sure that “services are run on business lines” and “an attractive business climate” exists for the private sector (Bayliss, 2008, 151).

In a paper published in 1993, John Briscoe, then a senior water and sanitation specialist at the World Bank,³ touted the benefits of greater private-sector participation (Briscoe, 1993). According to Briscoe, “[m]any industrialized countries have found it difficult to reform public enterprises except as part of a move to privatize them” (ibid., 31). Burdened with “an atmosphere of lethargy” and “large public-sector

¹ The International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade had the following target: “by 1990 everyone in the world should have access to 20-30 litres per day of clean drinking water and associated sanitation” (Pickford, 1980, 459). This target emerged at the 1976 Habitat I conference in Vancouver, Canada and at the 1977 UN Conference on Water in Mar del Plata, Argentina (ibid., 459). Two UN water decades have since followed: the International Decade for Action – Water for Life (2005-2015) and the International Decade for Action – Water for Sustainable Development (2018-2028).

² A UN report on the Decade, published in 1990, concludes that “the number of people without safe water decreased from 1,825 million to 1,232 million, while the number of people without suitable sanitation remained virtually the same” (UN, 1990, 19).

³ Briscoe, an environmental engineer, later became a professor of practice at Harvard University.

bureaucracies” (ibid., 31), developing countries were said to have much to learn from this experience in order to reverse “the persistently poor performance of their public utilities” (ibid., 32). Briscoe acknowledged that engaging the private sector in water provision would not always be easy in practice, but he claimed that much depended on “political will”: “once a political decision is made to involve the private sector, it can be done successfully. Where there is a will, there is a way” (ibid., 35). Importantly, however, he made it clear that the state was not to overstep its role in privatization programs:

To allow helpful change to occur, government must concentrate on the things that it and only it can do. Its job is to define and enforce an appropriate legal, regulatory, and administrative framework ... so that the private sector can participate with confidence. (ibid., 35)

For critical scholars like Goldman (2007), arguments about the superiority of the private sector vis-à-vis public utilities were grounded in a “neoliberal logic of privatization” (ibid., 787) that was propagated by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and their allied “transnational policy networks” throughout the 1990s. By making debt relief and infrastructure loans conditional upon water services privatization, the IFIs forced governments of Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) to dismantle public assets and capacities in the name of structural adjustment and “green neoliberalism.”

Neoliberal logics in the water sector were embedded in a more general “turn towards neoliberalism in political-economic practices and thinking since the 1970s,” which involved “[d]eregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision” (Harvey, 2005, 2-3). Margaret Thatcher, prime minister of the UK from 1979 to 1990, famously used a “neoliberal rhetoric” of “there is no alternative” to justify the adoption of free-market policies as “the only reasonable agenda possible” (Séville, 2017, 455).

1.1. Water Services Privatization in the Global South

In 1989, water authorities in England and Wales were privatized by full divestiture.⁴ Beginning in the early 1990s, private companies from Europe and the US (and their subsidiaries) became increasingly involved in the water sectors of developing countries on the basis of various contractual arrangements (for an overview, see Table 1.1).

⁴ Bakker (2004) provides an in-depth analysis of the 1989 privatization and subsequent “re-regulation” of water companies in England and Wales. In this work, Bakker also coins the term “uncooperative commodity,” suggesting that water has some inherent features that make it unsuitable for commercialization.

Table 1.1. Spectrum of Private-Sector Participation in the Water Sector, from “Light” to “Deep”

	Service contract	Management contract	Lease / affermage	Concession	BOT-type	Divestiture
Asset ownership	Public	Public	Public	Public	Private / public	Private
Capital investment	Public	Public	Public	Private	Private	Private
Commercial risk	Public	Public	Shared	Private	Private	Private
Operations / maintenance	Private / public	Private	Private	Private	Private	Private
Contract duration	1-2 years	3-5 years	8-15 years	25-30 years	20-30 years	Indefinite

Source: Budds and McGranahan (2003, 89: Table 1). Note: Versions of this table appear in many publications discussing private-sector participation in the water sector, for example in Davis (2005, 149), Finger and Allouche (2002, 18), Gunawansa et al. (2013, 20), and Prasad (2006, 682). The idea of the “light” to “deep” spectrum is borrowed from Davis (2005). BOT = Build-Operate-Transfer.

Divestiture remained rare outside the UK, however (Budds and McGranahan, 2003, 90),⁵ and many projects in the global South involved less than complete asset sale, with the public sector retaining asset ownership and some responsibility for infrastructure investment and commercial risk.

During the “privatization decade” from 1993 to 2003 (Franceys, quoted in Tutusaus, 2019, 12), more than 300 Public-Private Partnership (PPP) projects in water and sewerage were initiated in low- and middle-income countries (Table 1.2), most of them in Latin America (e.g., in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Argentina) and in East Asia and the Pacific (e.g., in China, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia). Sub-Saharan Africa was not hit as hard by the “privatization wave” of the 1990s due to the expected high risk and low profitability in the region, but it still saw 19 projects reach financial closure in the period 1993-2003, including in low-income countries such as Mozambique, Uganda, Niger, and Tanzania (Table 1.2; see also Bayliss, 2003; Estache, 2019).

Table 1.2. PPP Projects in Water and Sewerage (1993-2003)

	Number of projects	Number of projects cancelled/distressed	Number of countries
Latin America and the Caribbean	156	23	12
East Asia and the Pacific	124	24	7
Europe and Central Asia	26	2	12
Sub-Saharan Africa	19	4	12
Middle East and North Africa	5	1	3
South Asia	2	0	1
Total	332	54	47

Source: Budds and McGranahan (2003, 102: Table 3); The World Bank – Private Participation in Infrastructure (PPI) database, retrieved from <https://ppi.worldbank.org/en/customquery>. Note: For this analysis, duplicate entries (project name) have been removed from the PPI dataset.

⁵ Exceptions include Belize, discussed below, and Chile, where water services were privatized by partial divestiture. For a discussion of water services privatization in Chile, see Baer (2014). In Chile, neoliberal thinking has also been a pervasive force in water resources management. Bauer (2004) offers a detailed examination of the country’s Water Code, discussing attempts to reform this market-oriented law. The Water Code dates from 1981 and provides the legal foundation for water markets in Chile.

Over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, it increasingly grew apparent that PPPs might not be the “silver bullet” that the World Bank and other donor agencies had expected. Rather, the high hopes placed on the private sector began to dissolve as one privatization experiment after another derailed in cities of the global South. As shown in Table 1.2, of the 332 projects initiated between 1993 and 2003, 54 were cancelled or ended “in distress.” Some of the most dramatic cases of privatization failure unfolded in Bolivia, Argentina, Belize, and Tanzania. In the following paragraphs, I briefly discuss these cases to illustrate some of the main challenges that have emerged in partnerships with the private sector, including tariff disputes, weak regulation, and economic instability.

Cochabamba, Bolivia – concession contract (1999-2000): In 1999, a 40-year concession contract was signed for the Bolivian city of Cochabamba. The contract, together with a new law, entitled an international consortium (Aguas del Tunari) to take over the public water utility SEMAPA and lay claim to the city’s water resources, including the water feeding communal self-help systems. The consortium was led by a subsidiary of the US company Bechtel. According to Baer (2008), the Bolivian government was pressured by the World Bank into the contract and, fearing a backlash, it conducted the negotiations in a highly secretive and exclusionary manner. When Aguas del Tunari took over Cochabamba’s water supply, the company “instituted massive rate hikes and carried out seizures of private and communitarian water systems” (ibid., 202). In protest, activists and water users in Cochabamba formed a coalition, known as *La Coordinadora*. In the spring of 2000, “more than one hundred thousand citizens from Cochabamba and the surrounding areas participated in a general strike and multiple highway blockades across the nation” (ibid., 203). The government at first tried to shut down the protests, but when they persisted, it cancelled the concession and returned the utility back to public hands. Bechtel and other shareholders of Aguas del Tunari subsequently contacted the World Bank’s International Center for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) to request compensation of USD 25 million (some say USD 50 million) from the Bolivian government. Bechtel eventually backed down in 2005 in response to civil society protests, and a small symbolic payment from Bolivia to Bechtel marked the official end of the case (Gunawansa and Garcia, 2013, 369; Schiffler, 2015, 24-25).⁶ For environmental activist Vandana Shiva, the story of Cochabamba demonstrates “that privatization is not inevitable and that corporate takeover of vital resources can be prevented by people’s democratic will” (Shiva, 2002, 103). Although SEMAPA’s problems were far from resolved with re-municipalization, the Cochabamba “water war” continues to be

⁶ For a detailed account of the turn of events in Cochabamba, see also Shultz (2008).

invoked “as one of the best examples of successful grassroots resistance to private sector participation in water supply in countries of the South” (Bakker, 2010, 167).⁷

Buenos Aires, Argentina – concession contract (1993-2006): In 1993, OSN, the public water utility of the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, was privatized on the basis of a 30-year concession contract.⁸ The lead investors in the private concessionaire, Aguas Argentinas, were French and Spanish multinational companies (Loftus and McDonald, 2001, 185). According to Loftus and McDonald (2001, 184-185), OSN “was clearly ripe for major reform” but “such reform was not considered outside of the private sector. It seemed there was to be no alternative to privatization.” While the Buenos Aires concession was supposed to reduce water tariffs and lead to network expansion, the cost of water actually went up for consumers as a result of pre-privatization tariff increases and new fees imposed by the private operator, which, at the same time, tried to delay infrastructure investments for as long as possible. The regulator ETOSS remained a “largely toothless” and “virtually meaningless” player (ibid., 198) and was repeatedly ignored when the government re-negotiated the concession contract with Aguas Argentinas. In 2000, World Bank researchers were still optimistic about the concession. Despite some “flaws” and “institutional weaknesses,” the PPP in Buenos Aires was said to have “led to major gains in performance and in consumer welfare” (Alcázar et al., 2000, 41-42). In the early 2000s, however, Argentina plunged into an economic downturn coupled with a currency crisis. In the face of the crisis, the government refused to grant yet another tariff increase to Aguas Argentinas, leading to the collapse of the PPP in 2006. Buenos Aires moved forward with a new public water utility (named AySA), but the government was haunted by the privatization experience in 2010, when ICSID issued a verdict on the case (Schiffler, 2015, 41-44).⁹

Belize City, Belize – partial divestiture (2001-2005): In 2001, the water utility serving Belize City was privatized by partial divestiture. The decision to privatize the city’s water system was reportedly surrounded by “a sense of inevitability” (Mustafa and Reeder, 2009, 796). Soon after the contract was signed, tensions started to arise between the government of Belize and the British-Dutch private company CASCAL BV. Although the contract was to last for 25 years, the government cancelled it in 2005 and “signed a re-purchase agreement with CASCAL to buy back the company [Belize Water Supply Limited]”

⁷ The water war’s aftermath and the continuing challenges with SEMAPA are discussed in Bakker (2010, 168-169), Razavi (2019), Shultz (2008), and Spronk (2007).

⁸ The privatization of OSN was part of a larger privatization program in Argentina’s water and sanitation sector at the time. For an in-depth analysis of the program and the factors influencing contractual stability, see Post (2014).

⁹ ICSID ruled in favor of Aguas Argentinas, suggesting “that the Argentinian government unfairly refused to allow the concessionaires to raise tariffs during the period of economic turbulence following the devaluation of the Argentine peso in 2001” (Gunawansa and Garcia, 2013, 366). The shareholders involved in the Buenos Aires concession demanded USD 1.2 billion in compensation, which was deemed unacceptable by the government of Argentina (Schiffler, 2015, 44).

(ibid., 795-796). The immediate reason for the cancellation was a dispute over tariffs, but other problems were also evident, such as affordability concerns, high disconnection rates, and a lack of customer care on the part of the private utility. A few months before the privatization ended, Belize experienced “occasional riots over water and other utility rates” (ibid., 805). For the residents of Belize City, the privatization of water services not only complicated their material access to water but also brought back memories of colonialism and foreign rule, harming their sense of sovereignty and national pride. Overall, in Belize City, “the actual experience of service delivery from privatization was much more mixed than is often touted by apologists of neoliberalism” (ibid., 805).

Dar es Salaam, Tanzania – lease contract (2003-2005): In Dar es Salaam, privatization of the public water utility DAWASA was put on the agenda in the late 1990s as “a pre-condition set by donors for the Government of Tanzania to receive HIPC funding” (Bayliss, 2008, 170). As in Buenos Aires and Belize City, “[n]o alternatives were presented. The only options considered were different forms of privatization” (ibid., 171). City Water Services, a British-German-Tanzanian consortium, was the sole bidder for a ten-year lease contract, which was signed in 2003. City Water Services took over a utility that could be described as “dismal with ageing infrastructure and system losses exceeding 50 per cent” (ibid., 170). No functioning regulator was in place when the contract became effective. The private consortium failed to improve DAWASA’s performance, did not meet its investment targets, and missed lease payments to the government of Tanzania. In response, in 2005, the government terminated the contract and established a new public company (DAWASCO) to manage water services in Dar es Salaam. Biwater, the British shareholder of City Water Services, tried to win compensation from Tanzania but was unsuccessful before both ICSID and a court in the UK (Gunawansa and Garcia, 2013, 373-374).

These and other experiences of privatization failure proved somewhat sobering for the proponents of private-sector participation. As noted by Prasad (2006), many privatization experiments in developing countries ended in “policy failures” and “street protests” (ibid., 683), as it became clear “that there is, after all, a significant conflict between social development, public health and environmental concerns and poverty reduction, on the one hand, and the private sector’s motive of profit maximising, on the other” (ibid., 688). In a process of “soul-searching,” even the World Bank admitted in 2005 “that privatisation may not make sense in certain local contexts” (ibid., 686). A landmark study sponsored by the bank (Marin, 2009) acknowledged that PPPs in urban water services are “not a magic formula” (ibid., 10) but rather “complex and risky endeavors” (ibid., 36). While private companies may have achieved some successes in improving service quality and operational efficiency, the hoped-for private investments have, according to the study, largely failed to materialize. On the whole, the study finds “no evidence that PPP projects are necessarily more efficient than publicly managed utilities for expanding access” (ibid., 65). In

a marked shift from earlier pro-privatization rhetoric, PPPs are modestly proposed as “merely one instrument among many for improving performance outcomes” (ibid., 15), with their viability conditional upon a number of contextual factors. Although the World Bank never fully turned its back on privatization as a strategy for utility reform (Bayliss, 2011), the study indicates that the bank had at least adopted a more moderate stance by the late 2000s.

Private water companies themselves started changing course in the 2000s. According to Davis (2005, 175), “[s]everal multinational firms have ... reevaluated their involvement in the W&S [water supply and sanitation] sector of developing countries, recently indicating that the degree of political and financial risk ... may exceed what they are prepared to bear.” Prasad (2006, 683) similarly reported that “major water companies (Suez, Veolia, and Thames Water) are withdrawing from developing countries as a result of economic and financial crises ... and natural disasters.” In more metaphorical terms, Swyngedouw (2005, 98) suggested that “increasingly, water companies themselves find that the promised honey-pots of large profits in the water business may not be as plentiful as portrayed by the World Bank and other pundits of liberalization. Some have begun to withdraw from the water sector.”

Managers of companies like Saur, Veolia, and Biwater dashed any remaining hopes for pro-poor interventions by the private sector, making it clear “that low-income populations do not represent an attractive market because they are too poor to be profitable and represent too great a financial risk” (Budds and McGranahan, 2003, 109). They also indicated “that their companies can only operate in conditions that ensure an adequate and sustained rate of return for their shareholders, and that this is seldom the case in developing countries, particularly in relation to serving the poor and very poor members of the population” (Castro, 2007, 761).

Private multinationals did not completely withdraw from water-related PPPs, but long-term leases and concessions (which involve higher commercial risks for the private sector) became less common in developing countries. Instead, private companies increasingly opted for shorter-term and lower-risk contract types such as service and management contracts, and directed their investments away from Latin America and towards East Asia, especially China (Morgan, 2011, 8; Zhong et al., 2008).

1.2. Alternatives to Privatization

With the World Bank softening its position on privatization and private water companies on the retreat, there was a sense among water activists at the 2005 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil that they were “winning the privatisation debate” (quoted in Terhorst, 2008, 105). But the realization soon followed

that simply rejecting privatization was not enough. Many public water and sanitation operators continued to deliver poor-quality services and were plagued by underperformance and mismanagement. The question, therefore, was: “if privatisation is not the answer, then what is?” (Spronk, 2016, 263). To overcome what Ferguson (2010) calls “the politics of the ‘anti’” (ibid., 169) – or “a politics largely defined by negation and disdain” (ibid., 166) – activists embarked on a search for alternative modes of utility reform and service delivery in the mid-2000s.

The Municipal Services Project became one of the focal points for this search. The project is led by David McDonald, a professor of Global Development Studies at Queen’s University in Canada. It was launched in 2000 and today “is a global research network that explores alternatives to the privatization and commercialization of service provision in electricity, health, water and sanitation” (Municipal Services Project, n.d.).¹⁰ In the beginning, the Municipal Services Project was “focused on critiques of privatization,” especially in Southern Africa. From 2008 onwards, the project’s remit became more global and shifted to “analyzing successful public service delivery models to understand the conditions required for their sustainability and reproducibility” (ibid.).

In 2012, the Municipal Services Project published an edited volume, titled *Alternatives to Privatization: Public Options for Essential Services in the Global South* (McDonald and Ruiters, 2012a). The book explicitly challenges the “there is no alternative” discourse and seeks to contribute, in a systematic way, to an emerging “counter-narrative” that “[moves] beyond critiques of privatization and [proposes] new ways forward” (McDonald and Ruiters, 2012c, 8). As the editors put it, “[d]espite the decidedly undemocratic pronouncement by neoliberals that ‘there is no alternative’ to [their] free market utopia ... the necessity of alternatives has been thrust onto our agenda by capital’s chaos and the failures of privatization” (McDonald and Ruiters, 2012b, 492). The book is guided by “questions of what constitutes alternatives, what makes them successful (or not), what improvements have been achieved, and what lessons are to be learned for future service delivery debates” (McDonald and Ruiters, 2012c, 1).

Based on a participatory research process involving academics and activists, the volume brings together conceptual insights as well as specific examples of alternatives from different world regions (Asia, Africa, and Latin America) and sectors (water and sanitation, health, and electricity). Underlying the book’s conceptual, regional, and sector-specific chapters is a definition of “alternatives to privatization” that includes “(i) ‘public’ entities that are entirely state-owned and operated ... (ii) ‘non-state’ organizations that operate independently of the state on a not-for-profit basis and are oriented to principles of equality

¹⁰ For a list of Municipal Services Project partners, see Appendix I.

and social citizenship” and (iii) various partnership constellations between public and non-profit entities. Not included in the definition are “all forms of private, for-profit actors, be they large corporations or for-profit NGOs” (McDonald and Ruiters, 2012c, 3).

Three chapters in *Alternatives to Privatization* deal specifically with water and sanitation. Dargantes et al. (2012) explore alternatives to water privatization and commercialization in Asia and find that public/non-profit partnerships represent “the most common alternative service delivery mechanism” (ibid., 227) in the region, especially in South Asia. Bayliss and Adam (2012) are having trouble finding genuine alternatives in Sub-Saharan Africa, suggesting that the region lags “far behind the rest of the world in terms of the existence of robust alternatives to commercialized and privatized water provision” (ibid., 320). The situation appears to be somewhat more encouraging in North Africa, particularly in Morocco and Tunisia, as both countries have well-run public water utilities. Spronk et al. (2012) are able to identify a range of alternatives in Latin America, which they attribute in part to vibrant social movement activism in the region (see also Spronk, 2016).

1.3. Postneoliberal Water Governance

In her article “Neoliberal versus Postneoliberal Water,” Bakker (2013) puts the search for “alternatives to privatization” in conversation with larger debates over “postneoliberalism.” The article seeks “to inject a cautionary note into debates over resistance to neoliberalization” (ibid., 257) and questions whether purported postneoliberal alternatives truly break with, or move beyond, neoliberal practices. State-led and community-based alternatives in water governance “are both symbolically and practically significant; however, in some cases they might also be ambiguous insofar as they might be compatible with neoliberalization” or “perhaps even constitutive of ... processes of neoliberalization” (ibid., 257).¹¹

Postneoliberalism as a concept “was introduced [in the late 1990s] by progressive intellectuals and leftist governments in Latin America, especially in Brazil” (Brand, 2016, 583).¹² Different understandings of the concept have emerged, some more radical than others, but “[a] common denominator is that ‘postneoliberalism’ is a term that reflects the analytical and political-strategic search for alternatives to neoliberalism” (ibid., 583). In an analytical sense, a postneoliberal perspective is not limited to signs of a

¹¹ For a critical discussion of community-based alternatives to privatization, see Bakker (2008).

¹² One of Latin America’s foremost postneoliberal scholars is the Brazilian Emir Sader. According to Sader (2009, 177), “Latin America was the first region to adopt neoliberalism as its hegemonic model, as well as the earliest to try to implant alternatives.” Governments envisioning alternative “political models” in the region were trying to ensure that “economic concerns are subordinate to social concerns, breaking the hegemony of financial capital and market mechanisms.”

complete break with neoliberalism; it is more nuanced in that it looks at both “continuous and discontinuous dynamics” (ibid., 587) and tries “to detect which characteristics of neoliberalism change and which persist” (ibid., 586).

According to Yates and Bakker (2014, 64), the concept of postneoliberalism, in a more substantive sense, is defined by two goals: “(1) redirecting a market economy towards social concerns; and (2) reviving citizenship via a new politics of participation and alliances across sociocultural sectors and groups.” The first goal can involve, *inter alia*, the “[r]e-regulation of the social sector and social services,” for instance “public provision of basic services, particularly in relation to public goods such as water” (ibid., 71). While Yates and Bakker detect signs of a postneoliberal turn in Latin American New Left politics, they, like Bakker (2013), are cautious as to postneoliberalism’s transformative potential: “The post-neoliberal project does not – and cannot – entail a wholesale break from neoliberalism or produce its binary other, since the concrete possibilities for such [a break] are filtered out by historically constituted institutional conditions” (Yates and Bakker, 2014, 64).

Harris and Roa-García (2013) similarly explore postneoliberal possibilities in Latin America, focusing on water governance reforms in Uruguay, Ecuador, and Bolivia between 2004 and 2009. Postneoliberalism, in the Latin American context, is used “not as a descriptor of an era, nor as a wholesale departure from neoliberalism, but rather as a conceptual tool that might allow us to evaluate the stabilities of neoliberal configurations, or the pathways through which specific ‘alternative’ concepts or practices might emerge” (ibid., 22). The constitutions of the three countries show postneoliberal characteristics in that they declare “water as a human right and [make] provisions that water and sanitation services must remain an exclusive and direct responsibility of the state – explicitly outlawing privatization” (ibid., 23). However, amending legal texts is easier than “achieving reform on the ground” (ibid., 26). As the cases of Ecuador and Bolivia suggest, several contradictions and ambiguities remain in implementing progressive water laws in Latin America. Harris and Roa-García nevertheless emphasize the “strategic or aspirational value” (ibid., 27) of the reform initiatives, as the new constitutional provisions draw attention to water governance aspects previously ignored under neoliberal regimes.

Like Yates and Bakker (2014) and Harris and Roa-García (2013), Marston (2015) engages with postneoliberalism in the context of Latin America, noting that three countries in the region – Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador – have been the most adamant in their “opposition to neoliberalism” (ibid., 247: Note 3). Examining the case of Bolivia, Marston refers to the Cochabamba “water war” as a “post-neoliberal turning point” (ibid., 248), but she also makes it clear that Bolivia’s political leadership failed to follow through on much of its postneoliberal rhetoric. Disappointed with the political class, many activists

in Bolivia have turned away from the state and are focusing on community-based solutions instead. One example are the water committees operating in Cochabamba's peri-urban areas. Cochabamba's water committees understand themselves as "autonomous" from both the state and the private sector, but Marston shows that their independence is in fact quite fragile and easily undermined.

McDonald and Ruiters (2012a) do not frame *Alternatives to Privatization* in postneoliberal terms, but their volume has much in common with the research on postneoliberal water governance, just reviewed. Most importantly, both bodies of work engage with concepts and approaches that try to transcend market-oriented modes of water management and water service provision. Scholarship on water and postneoliberalism remains focused on Latin America and is strongly informed by political developments and theoretical thinking in the region. The work of the Municipal Services Project is more global in its outlook and has a "participatory action research" component, in that it involves activists themselves in the research process. It is also more normative than the postneoliberal school, in that researchers affiliated with the project "want to speak loudly in favour of efforts to find, initiate, and promote positive alternatives" (McDonald and Ruiters, 2012c, 8).

1.4. Water Operator Partnerships (WOPs)

A notion that appears in both strands of research is that of "partnership." Research on postneoliberal water governance has tended to focus on community-led partnerships (e.g., Marston, 2015). In *Alternatives to Privatization*, McDonald and Ruiters (2012c, 3, 2012d, 23) adopt a more expansive perspective that also embraces the state, but what is only mentioned in passing in some of the chapters is a partnership type called Water Operator Partnerships (WOPs). According to Blokland and Schwartz (2013, 154), "the concept of 'Water Operator Partnerships' (WOPs) surfaced as a possible alternative for improving service provision in developing countries" at a time when "the 'privatization decade' [1993-2003] lost momentum." Boag and McDonald (2010) include a discussion of WOPs in their review of Public-Public Partnerships (PUPs) in the water sector. Yet, describing WOPs as "an obfuscatory concept" (ibid., 2) that could "potentially undermine the larger socio-political objectives of PUPs" (ibid., 10), they remain highly skeptical of whether WOPs can be considered an alternative to private-sector participation. Water governance scholars Bakker (2010, 241-242: Note 93), Gunawansa et al. (2013, 11), and Morgan (2011, 6-7) briefly refer to WOPs but offer no further elaboration or assessment.

1.5. Research Questions and Methods

1.5.1. Research Questions

In order to fill this gap, I contribute an in-depth empirical analysis of the WOP approach in this dissertation. Informed by the work of the Municipal Services Project and postneoliberal scholarship, I examine whether WOPs present an alternative to private-sector engagement in water and sanitation. In other words, do WOPs offer an effective approach to utility reform and service improvement that prioritizes social equity and participation over profit making and efficiency? Or, following Brand (2016, 586), “which characteristics of neoliberalism change and which persist” in the WOP approach, both conceptually and in practice?

1.5.2. Data Sources

To answer these questions, I rely on the following combination of qualitative data:

Primary Documents: I use information from primary documents such as government strategies, contracts and agreements, reports, policy papers, news articles, and meeting minutes. Some of these documents are publicly available while others have been shared with me during fieldwork or by email upon request.

Interviews: I also draw on 76 semi-structured or open-ended interviews with UN representatives, donors, water utility staff, activists, consultants, and academics. I conducted the interviews between June 2018 and February 2020, either in-person (50) or via phone/Skype (26).¹³ Almost all of the interviews were held in English.¹⁴ As WOPs have evolved into a global phenomenon, the in-person interviews took place in various sites: Belgium, France, Germany, Malawi, the Netherlands, South Africa, Spain, and the US.¹⁵ A number of key interviews were further conducted during the 2018 and 2019 World Water Week conferences in Stockholm, Sweden and during a 2018 conference on water and blended finance in Eschborn, Germany. The starting point for the interviews was a short course on “partnerships for water supply and sanitation” at the IHE Delft Institute for Water Education. The three-week course lasted from June 11 to June 29, 2018 and allowed me to make initial contact with WOP researchers and practitioners in the Netherlands. Based on the contacts obtained at the IHE, I expanded the interviews to other stakeholders through “*snowball sampling*” (Weiss, 1994, 25).

¹³ A list of the interviews is provided in Appendix II.

¹⁴ Two interviews were held in German, my native language.

¹⁵ Given the geographical focus on my research, voices from Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa are more strongly represented in the interviews than voices from Asia and Latin America, where WOPs have also gained traction.

Participant Observation: In addition to multiple shorter fieldtrips for interviews, I undertook one month (November 2018) of in-depth fieldwork in Lilongwe, Malawi in order to observe two WOPs up-close. Apart from collecting primary documents and doing interviews, I accompanied local and expatriate staff on site visits and followed along daily routines via participant observation.

1.5.3. Gatekeepers and Positionality

A team from the Netherlands acted as the “gatekeeper” (Campbell et al., 2006) for my fieldwork in Malawi. As an individual graduate student with no prior connections to the water utility in Lilongwe, it is unlikely that I would have gained access without the assistance of Dutch expatriate staff working with the utility. The team from the Netherlands obtained permission for my research from the utility’s CEO and introduced me to key staff upon my arrival in the field.¹⁶ Endorsement from the utility’s upper management proved crucial for my research, as it signaled the go-ahead for staff to answer my questions. It also allowed me to move around the water utility offices and visit places not accessible to the general public (e.g., GIS department, water treatment plants, repair shop, storage rooms). As it turned out, the utility staff in Lilongwe was accustomed to receiving short-term visitors from the Netherlands on a regular basis, so my presence (as a white European interested in WOPs) did not seem to attract major attention. While the assistance from the Dutch team was invaluable for my fieldwork, it also positioned me close to one particular actor in WOPs. In interviews with local staff, I explained that I was a student researcher and that the information shared would be used towards my doctoral dissertation. While one individual in Lilongwe (not working for the water utility) cancelled an interview due to confusion about my relationship with the Dutch, this incident remained an exception during my time in the field.¹⁷

1.6. Dissertation Outline

Chapter 2, *Water Operator Partnerships: Conceptual Origins and Global Governance*, starts at the global level and examines the emergence of WOPs in the mid-2000s. The chapter traces the conceptual origins of WOPs and introduces the governance architecture that has been created to promote the approach and steer its implementation. WOPs have been recognized for their potential to contribute to international

¹⁶ The Dutch team also provided on-site transportation on some occasions, which facilitated my moving back and forth between the utility head office and the zone offices (see Chapter 5).

¹⁷ Other students seem to have confronted similar challenges with “gatekeepers” in their research on WOPs. Ilona van Meurs, who wrote a master’s thesis about WOPs in Vietnam and Mongolia, reports that her respondents from local utilities “may not always have uncovered the true issues.” Rather, they may have offered “politically correct answers,” as they were aware “that the research was conducted under [Dutch] supervision” (van Meurs, 2010, 87). Lucía Wright-Contreras, a doctoral student researching the same WOP in Vietnam, recently published a portion of her findings with a former Dutch manager of that partnership as a co-author (Wright-Contreras et al., 2020).

development goals and have been implemented in various parts of the world, especially in the form of South-South partnerships in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Yet upscaling has been slower than expected due to funding shortages and donor skepticism. After a challenging period in 2016/17, the UN and other stakeholders are renewing their efforts to bring WOPs to scale.

Chapter 3, *From Radical Alternative to Mainstream Compromise: Pro-Public Struggles*, shows how the WOP concept grew out of, and eventually diverged from, the older idea of PUPs. When the WOP approach was taking shape, activists representing public water utilities, civil society, and trade unions were concerned that the partnerships would be usurped by the private sector for commercial goals. While pro-public activists were unable to prevent the possibility of participation by private companies, a core of activists kept advocating for a public orientation of the new partnership mechanism. The inclusion of the private sector in the WOP initiative was perceived as a dilution of its radical potential but was ultimately accepted as the price to pay for an affiliation with the UN. Although activists failed to exclude private operators from WOPs, they succeeded in establishing an oversight mechanism to monitor compliance with a set of guiding principles and a code of conduct, including a so-called “integrity clause.” Representing yet another compromise, this mechanism has limited investigative and enforcement powers, but, as the first case under scrutiny suggests, it may still be useful in detecting possible transgressions and violations of the foundational principles of WOPs.

Chapter 4, *Between Solidarity and Self-Interest: Mentor Motivations*, focuses on a central debate within the global WOP community: what motivates water operators to share their knowledge and expertise with other operators on a not-for-profit basis? The not-for-profit principle is one of the defining characteristics of WOPs but runs counter to the decades-long history of PPP promotion in the water sector. If water operators can make money by “selling” their know-how through service and management contracts, why would they engage in WOPs free-of-charge? Drawing on a larger literature about the role of solidarity and self-interest in development assistance, this chapter engages with these questions by analyzing two “operators” (from the Netherlands and Uganda) in greater detail.¹⁸ Private water companies have been much less active in WOPs than activists had feared. The Dutch and Ugandan operators examined in this chapter are both publicly owned and have been selected for analysis due to their high level of involvement

¹⁸ Technically, the Dutch “operator” is a public limited company made up of several public water companies (see Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion).

in WOPs as “mentors.”¹⁹ What emerges from the case studies is that the motives behind mentoring activities are much more diverse than suggested in the current debate, with solidarity playing no significant role at the organizational level. While critical discussions have centered on the inclusion of the private sector in WOPs (see Chapter 3), my findings point to a number of public-sector trends and developments – related to trade, investment, and corporatization – that could pose a more serious challenge to the WOP model as an alternative to PPPs.

Chapter 5, *Water Operator Partnerships in Lilongwe, Malawi: A Mentee Perspective*, explores how mentor interests and motivations affect the workings of two WOPs on the ground. Both the Dutch and the Ugandan operators examined in Chapter 4 have been involved in WOPs with the water utility serving Malawi’s capital Lilongwe.²⁰ The partnership mentored by the Dutch started as a PPP (2009-2014) and subsequently turned into a WOP (2015-2019), thus allowing for a direct comparison between the two partnership types. The latest partnership mentored by the Ugandans in Lilongwe was a WOP (2017-2018) facilitated by the African Water Association (AfWA). Both the Dutch and the Ugandan partnerships focused on water loss reduction, arguably the most important challenge facing the “mentee” in Lilongwe. The service contract and the WOP involving partners from the Netherlands failed to bring water losses down and hit a stalemate after years of difficult interactions. The advice from Uganda on illegal connections was, by contrast, eagerly adopted in Lilongwe. Taken together, evidence from Malawi points to the dangers of an increasing “professionalization” of WOPs, including the use of performance metrics inspired by the private sector, and shows how WOPs can work to reinforce corporatized service models as opposed to furthering social objectives and participation.

Chapter 6, *Conclusion: Water, Public Alternatives, and Postneoliberalism*, summarizes the main findings of this dissertation and suggests avenues for future research. In particular, the chapter highlights the need to refocus the debate on WOPs, beyond the private sector and towards public water and sanitation operators. Synthesizing insights from Chapters 4 and 5, I argue that two trends – professionalization and

¹⁹ As of 2018, the Dutch operator was the most active mentor in North-South partnerships, and the Ugandan operator was the most active mentor in South-South partnerships (see Beck, 2019, 5, 7). The operator sharing knowledge and expertise in a WOP is commonly referred to as the “mentor,” whereas the operator receiving training and advice is referred to as the “mentee.” Mentor and mentee labels are not always accurate in practice, as capacity development and knowledge sharing are often mutual in WOPs (for an example from Latin America, see Carolini et al., 2018). Yet the mentor-mentee terminology remains common parlance among WOP practitioners and is therefore adopted in this dissertation.

²⁰ The Ghana Water Company Limited in Accra, Ghana and the Nkana Water and Sewerage Company in Kitwe, Zambia have also partnered with both the Dutch and the Ugandans in WOPs and would therefore present suitable case studies. In this dissertation, I start with the case of Lilongwe due to my previous experience in Malawi as a volunteer. As a next step, I plan to extend the analysis to either Ghana or Zambia to corroborate or refine some of the arguments developed here.

corporatization – deserve special attention when discussing WOPs as an “alternative to privatization.”

Both professionalization and corporatization have received little attention at the global level but emerge as salient forces in the partnerships analyzed in this dissertation. Both trends are somewhat more concealed and less visible than the outright inclusion of the private sector in WOPs, but they are, from an “alternatives” perspective, no less problematic.

CHAPTER 2

Water Operator Partnerships: Conceptual Origins and Global Governance

This chapter introduces the concept of WOPs and the global governance architecture surrounding it. It traces the WOP idea back to its origins in the UN system and provides an overview of the Global WOP Alliance (GWOPA), including its structure, guiding principles, code of conduct, and activities. WOPs originate in the era of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) but have now successfully transitioned onto the sustainable development agenda. More than 200 WOPs have officially been recorded to date. Yet implementation at scale remains a challenge, mainly due to funding limitations and donor apprehensions. Tensions with its UN host agency further distracted GWOPA from working towards a large-scale adoption of WOPs. After a period of uncertainty in 2016/17, GWOPA has pulled itself out of crisis mode and is moving forward with a new strategy. As the alliance is trying to bring WOPs to scale, satisfaction of donor requirements seems to assume increasing importance.

2.1. UNSGAB and the Hashimoto Action Plan

The WOP concept was proposed for the first time by the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation (UNSGAB), established by Kofi Annan in March 2004. Composed of distinguished experts, the board's task was to provide independent advice and leadership to accelerate progress towards the MDG target on drinking water and sanitation (SDGs Knowledge Platform, n.d.b).¹

Two years into its work, UNSGAB published a Compendium of Actions, called the Hashimoto Action Plan (UNSGAB, 2006). The plan was released at the fourth World Water Forum in Mexico City in March 2006.² As stated in the plan, “[p]ublicly owned and managed water operators currently provide more than 90 percent of the world’s piped water” (ibid., 1). If the MDG water and sanitation target was to be reached, “capacity building of public water operators” (ibid., 3) – rather than their substitution by private entities – was recommended by UNSGAB as the way forward. To put capacity development into practice,

¹ MDG Target 7.C was to “[h]alve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation” (UN, n.d.).

² The Hashimoto Action Plan was named after the first chair of UNSGAB, Japan’s former prime minister Ryutaro Hashimoto. Hashimoto passed away in July 2006, shortly after the plan’s release. He was succeeded by Willem-Alexander, then crown prince of the Netherlands, who served as UNSGAB’s chair from 2006 to 2013 (UNSGAB, 2015, 2).

the plan proposed a new approach, taking the form of WOPs: “The Board recommends a new mechanism – water operators partnerships (WOPs). This would be a structured programme of cooperation among water operators, based on mutual support and on a not-for-profit basis” (ibid., 1). Considering “the preponderance of public sector undertakings,” the board anticipated “that most operating partnerships will be between public operators” (ibid., 3). However, in a controversial move, further discussed in Chapter 3, the members added that they would “not exclude private sector operators, NGOs or those who can contribute to the performance of public water undertakings on a not-for-profit basis” (ibid., 3).

2.2. Global WOP Alliance (GWOPA)

After appearing in the Hashimoto Action Plan, the WOP idea was catching on within the UN system. Initially, it was expected that no more than a web-based matching mechanism, managed by a small team within UN-Water,³ would be needed to get WOPs off the ground:

Operators and others will register on the internet site, using set information screens which will allow them to describe their situation. This system will use database software to create matches among the registrants according to the general descriptions of the problems (demands) and expertise (offers). Then, a list of possible partner(s) will be sent to the demander, who will be able to contact the offerer(s) for details, and will then be able to select the most appropriate partner(s). (Lobina and Hall, 2006, 22; see also Miranda, 2007, 68)

This early proposal did not materialize as such. Instead, GWOPA was launched during Stockholm World Water Week 2007 as a global multi-stakeholder alliance. In January 2009, GWOPA was officially founded as a program of UN-Habitat’s Urban Basic Services Branch.⁴

2.2.1. Governance Structure

As part of GWOPA’s governance structure, outlined in the alliance’s Charter (GWOPA, 2012), a secretariat was established that became responsible for knowledge management, advocacy, and fundraising for WOPs. Furthermore, a Steering Committee (SC) was created to provide advice and recommendations to the secretariat. The SC consists of members from the following categories: public operators or their associations, representing different world regions (majority); private operators or their associations; civil society organizations; trade unions; and donors and development partners. The executive director of UN-Habitat (or a representative) acts as the chair. Between 2009 and 2019, the SC

³ UN-Water, created in 2003, is the UN’s interagency coordination mechanism on water. For an analysis of UN-Water and its impact on global water governance, see Baumgartner and Pahl-Wostl (2013).

⁴ UN-Habitat is the UN Human Settlements Program, headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya.

met eleven times in different locations around the world to discuss GWOPA, the WOP mechanism and its implementation, and challenges along the way (Table 2.1). SC members (except donors and development partners) are elected for four-year terms by a General Assembly. The General Assembly is supposed to provide “an inclusive platform for all stakeholders that are interested in being part of the Alliance” (GWOPA, 2012).

Table 2.1. GWOPA Steering Committee Meetings (2009-2019)

	Place	Date
1st SC meeting	Nairobi	January 30, 2009
2nd SC meeting	Stockholm	August 16, 2009
3rd SC meeting	Stockholm	September 5, 2010
4th SC meeting	Amsterdam	November 1, 2011
5th SC meeting	Paris	February 28 - March 1, 2013
6th SC meeting	Marrakech	March 31 - April 1, 2014
7th SC meeting	Barcelona	February 19-20, 2015
8th SC meeting	Barcelona	January 28-29, 2016
9th SC meeting	Barcelona	February 1-2, 2017
10th SC meeting	Nairobi	May 9, 2018
11th SC meeting	Madrid	February 27, 2019

Source: Personal communication, GWOPA, April 2019; SC meeting outcome notes, 2009-2019.

2.2.2. Guiding Principles

The GWOPA Charter also outlines eight guiding principles for the work of the alliance, which refer to inclusiveness, the not-for-profit idea, mutuality of benefit, transparency, learning, support for WOP processes, sustainable change, and solidarity (GWOPA, 2012; see Appendix III). What is key in the list of principles is a reaffirmation of the inclusion of the private sector (“GWOPA shall be as inclusive as possible and reach out to all stakeholders in the water supply and sanitation sector including ... private water operators ... and private sector players”); a reiteration of the not-for-profit principle (“funding of partnerships ... should cover direct costs only without profit of any sort for any participating party”); and the idea of “mutuality of benefit” (which “shall be promoted whenever possible” and “be used as an incentive ... for utility cooperation on [a] non-profit basis”). The guiding principles also raise the notion of

“solidarity,” stipulating that “GWOPA shall embrace and promote a spirit of solidarity and mutual support.” Solidarity is not further defined in the Charter, but, following McDonald (2016a, 2196), could be taken to mean “cohesion among various producer and user groups and across sectors that builds economic, social and political commitment to a public service model” – or, in short, an attitude “that values cooperation and interdependency above profit and greed” (Mohanty and Miraglia, 2012, 101).

2.2.3. Code of Conduct

Apart from the guiding principles, GWOPA has adopted a code of conduct that specifies “ground rules” for the actual partnerships undertaken under the name of WOPs (GWOPA, 2012; see Appendix IV). Utility partners should “conduct their activities within the partnership according to the principles of good governance” and should “abide by and respect the social and cultural values of the location where they are engaging in WOPs.” Once again, the code reminds partners and stakeholders of the not-for-profit principle: “[a]ctivities carried out by any partner or stakeholder within a WOP shall be done on a not-for-profit basis. WOPs should never be used as a vehicle for commercial activities by any party.” Related to the principle of “mutuality of benefit,” the code refers to “shared incentives” and requests that “[t]he respective motivations of both parties shall be explicitly discussed.” While benefits may be “mutual,” they are “not necessarily equal” for both partners. Building on the principles of not-for-profit exchange and solidarity, the code also comprises an “integrity clause.” This clause was added to the original code in 2010 and was subject to much controversy within the SC, as will be discussed in Chapter 3.

2.2.4. Activities

Between 2009 and 2012, the GWOPA Secretariat operated out of the UN-Habitat headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya and received funding from a water and sanitation trust fund. In January 2012, when the fund had no more money available, GWOPA and UN-Habitat issued a hosting call for the secretariat. A few months later, it was announced that the city of Barcelona, Spain had won the bid over Delft, the Netherlands and Istanbul, Turkey, which had also expressed interest in becoming the new host location (*CatalanNews*, 2012; UN-Habitat, 2012).⁵ In Barcelona, GWOPA was offered generous office space at the historic Sant Pau Art Nouveau Site (Figures 2.1 and 2.2),⁶ known as “a hub of international organizations and knowledge institutes working on various development issues” (GWOPA, 2015c). The Spanish

⁵ It is interesting to note that Joan Clos, executive director of UN-Habitat at the time, is a former mayor of Barcelona, although it is unclear whether this connection had an impact on the hosting decision.

⁶ The Sant Pau Art Nouveau Site is a complex of Modernista-style pavilions that originally served as a hospital (1916-2009). It became a UNESCO world heritage site in 1997. Some of the pavilions have been turned into museum space while others now host offices of international organizations.

government further pledged to support GWOPA with a sum of EUR 1.1 million annually for five years. The Barcelona City Council, together with “a consortium of major private sector actors in the city,” welcomed GWOPA with a donation of EUR 500,000 (GWOPA, 2013, 7).⁷

Figure 2.1. Sant Pau Art Nouveau Site, Barcelona



Source: Photo by author, December 2019.

⁷ Among the private actors contributing to GWOPA was Aguas de Barcelona (Agbar), a private water company (*CatalanNews*, 2012). For a critical discussion of Agbar’s international activities, see March and Purcell (2014).

Figure 2.2. UN-Habitat Pavilion (Pavelló de Sant Leopold)



Source: Photo by author, December 2019.

In 2013, the GWOPA Secretariat relocated from Nairobi to its new host city Barcelona and released its first five-year strategy (GWOPA, 2013). The strategy defines a WOP as “a peer-support exchange between two or more water or sanitation operators, carried out on a not-for-profit basis with the objective of strengthening capacity, enhancing performance and enabling the water operator to provide a better service to more people, especially the poor” (ibid., 10). For the period 2013-2017, GWOPA set itself two main objectives: “to move to large-scale adoption of WOPs” (ibid., 6) and “to provide operational support to WOPs implementation in the field” (ibid., 7). Working towards these goals, the secretariat undertook a number of activities, including the organization of global conferences; support for regional and national platforms; creation and maintenance of a database; collaboration on applied research; and direct support for specific partnerships. In the sections that follow, I briefly discuss these activities and summarize some of the available policy information on WOPs.

2.2.4.1. Global WOP Congresses

GWOPA organized two global congresses in Barcelona, in 2013 and 2015. These followed the first congress that had taken place in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2011. The purpose of these events was “to gather the growing WOPs community in discussion about how best to address the challenges faced by the world’s public water and sanitation operators, and to learn from one another’s solutions” (GWOPA, 2016b, 1). Attendance of the congresses increased steadily over the years, from over 150 participants in 2011 to over 400 participants in 2015 (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2. Global WOP Congresses

	Date	Place	Number of attendees
1	March 20-21, 2011	Cape Town	over 150
2	November 27-29, 2013	Barcelona	275
3	September 16-18, 2015	Barcelona	over 400

Source: GWOPA (2011b, 2014, 2016b).

2.2.4.2. Regional and National WOP Platforms

GWOPA also offers support to regional and national platforms. These platforms engage in partnership coordination and fundraising in their respective regions and countries. According to GWOPA’s annual reports 2013-2016, regional platforms exist in Latin America and the Caribbean (WOP-LAC), the Caribbean (Cari-WOP), Africa (WOP-Africa), South-Eastern Europe (WOP-SEE), and Asia and the Pacific (WaterLinks). Two additional regional platforms – for Northern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula (Arab-WOP) and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (WOP-EE/CA) – are at the planning stage. National platforms have been established in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Honduras, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, and Pakistan (for a discussion of the relationship between GWOPA and the platforms, see Chapter 3).

2.2.4.3. WOP Database

In 2010, GWOPA was ready to go live with its own website, created with the help of a consultant (3rd SC meeting, outcome notes, September 2010). To keep track of partnerships and promote knowledge

management, the website features a publicly accessible online database of WOPs.⁸ As of July 2018, the database contained 211 WOP profiles, providing information on a variety of partnership dimensions. While the database is not without shortcomings,⁹ the existing entries give a first impression of the state of WOP practice around the world.

Four main findings emerge from the GWOPA Secretariat’s analyses (Pascual-Sanz et al., 2018; Wright-Contreras et al., 2020, 3-4), and my own examination (Beck, 2019), of the database:

- First, WOPs have taken place in four spatial-geographical configurations: North-North, North-South, South-South, and North-South-South (“triangular”). South-South WOPs represent the majority of the partnerships recorded in the database as of July 2018 (55.8 percent). North-South WOPs also account for a notable share (35.6 percent), whereas North-North and triangular WOPs have remained relatively rare (7.7 percent and 0.9 percent, respectively) (Table 2.3, see also Beck, 2019, 4-8; Pascual-Sanz et al., 2018, 85). Maps of South-South and North-South WOPs, as of July 2018, are shown in Figure 2.3.

Table 2.3. WOP Configurations

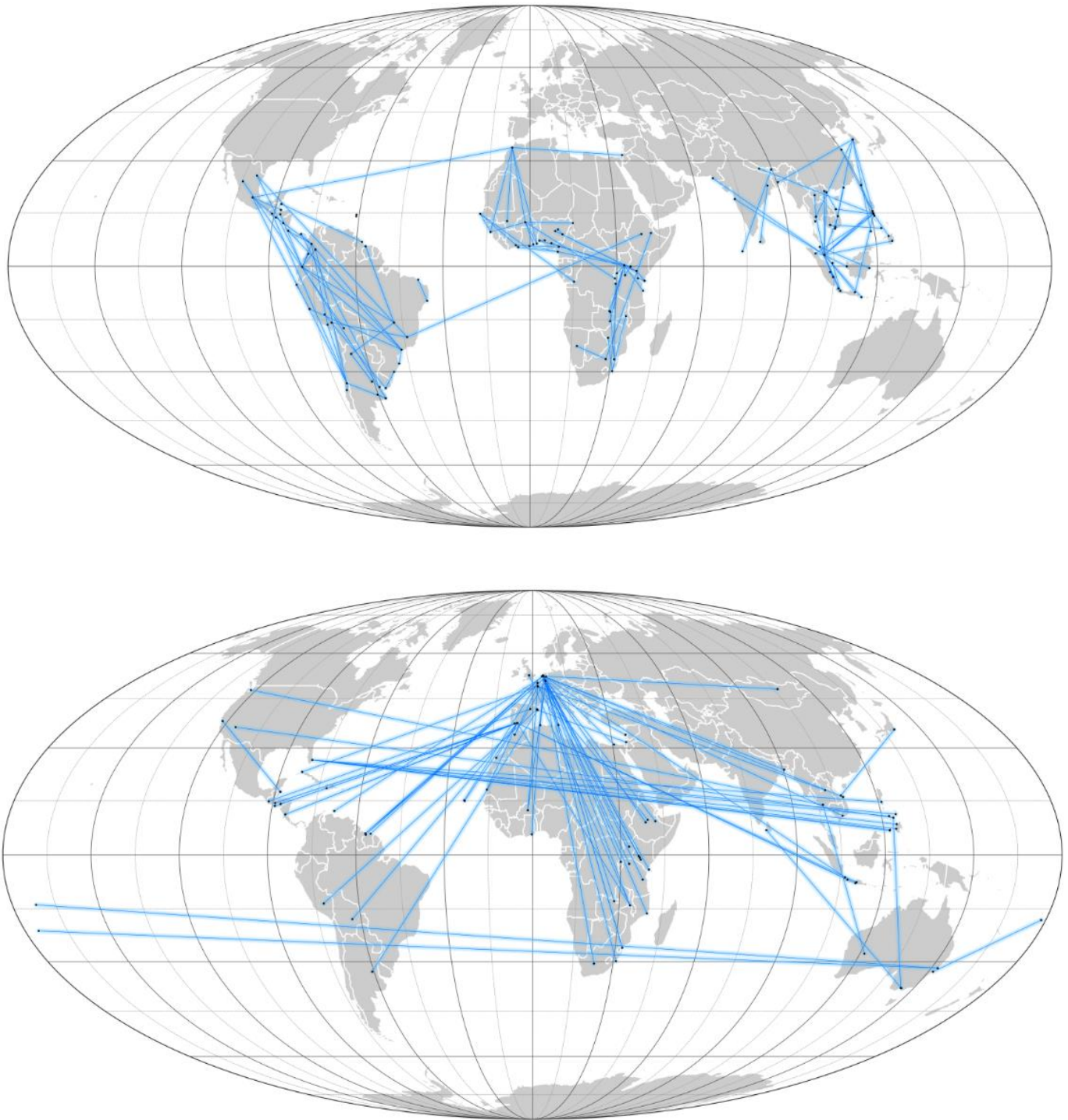
South-South	North-South	North-North	Triangular	Total
116 (55.8%)	74 (35.6%)	16 (7.7%)	2 (0.9%)	208 (100%)

Source: WOP database, as of July 2018. Cells report number of WOPs and corresponding percentages. Author’s counts and calculations. Note: Three WOPs are missing from Table 2.3 due to gaps in operator information or unclear spatial-geographical classification. The data in this table differs slightly from that reported in Beck (2019, 5: Table 1). The reason is that the scale dimension (international/regional/domestic) is not considered here, allowing for the inclusion of two additional South-South WOPs and one additional North-South WOP.

⁸ The database is available at <https://oldgwopa.pre.upcnet.es/en/wop-profiles>.

⁹ The information recorded in the database is mostly self-reported by WOP participants. On the database website (see Note 8 above), the GWOPA Secretariat states that “[d]ata is screened ... before uploading to the site, however it [the secretariat] can’t account for its reliability.” In a book chapter published in 2018, the secretariat further explains that “[t]he database is not an exhaustive compendium of WOPs worldwide and one should be aware of the lack of triangulation of data inserted” (Pascual-Sanz et al., 2018, 83).

Figure 2.3. South-South and North-South WOPs



Source: Beck (2019, 6: Figure 1, 7: Figure 2).

- Second, two “operators” stand out as the leading mentors in North-South and South-South WOPs, respectively: Vitens Evides International (VEI) of the Netherlands and the National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC) of Uganda (Beck, 2019, 5, 7). I provide an in-depth analysis of these two organizations and their mentoring activities in Chapter 4.
- Third, the database reveals that WOPs have addressed a broad range of technical areas. Among the most frequently addressed themes are operations and maintenance, water losses, asset management, and services to the poor (Pascual-Sanz et al., 2018, 86).
- Fourth, the database profiles confirm that there are various types of WOPs, which differ, among other things, by duration, activities, partnership terms, and financial arrangements (see Table 2.4). Of the partnerships recorded by GWOPA, 24.2 percent can be categorized as “simple” or “structured specific” WOPs, 69.2 percent as “structured comprehensive” WOPs, and 6.6 percent as “structured special-purpose” WOPs (Wright-Contreras et al., 2020, 3-4).

Table 2.4. WOP Typology

	Simple WOPs		Structured WOPs		
	<i>Informal</i>	<i>Formal</i>	<i>Specific</i>	<i>Comprehensive</i>	<i>Special-purpose</i>
Duration	0-1 year	0-1 year	up to 1 year	up to 4 years	long-term
Activities	- Phone consultations - Meetings - Study visits	- Workshops - Classroom training - On-the-job training - Internships - Technology demonstration	- Specific technical assistance - Major training programs	- Comprehensive technical assistance - Institutional development - Project management - Corporate development	- Association - Contractual relationship - Joint venture
Terms	- None - Letter - Simple agreement	- Written agreement - MOU	- Written agreement - MOU	- Written agreement - Service agreement	- Written agreement - Service agreement
Financial arrangements	- None - Each party covers own cost	- Cost split between parties - Donor agreement	- Cost split between parties - Owner subsidy - Donor agreement - IFI agreement	- Cost split between parties - Owner subsidy - Donor agreement - IFI agreement - Guarantee agreement	- Cost split between parties - Owner subsidy - Donor agreement - IFI agreement
Percentage of database profiles	24.2 percent			69.2 percent	6.6 percent

Source: IWA et al. (2009, 9: Diagram 2, 10: Table 1, 13: Table 2); Wright-Contreras et al. (2020, 3, 4: Figure 1).

Note: MOU = Memorandum of Understanding.

2.2.4.4. Boosting Effectiveness of Water Operators' Partnerships (BEWOP)

Since 2013, GWOPA has been involved in a collaborative research and outreach project, called Boosting Effectiveness of Water Operators' Partnerships (BEWOP). The project is carried out in cooperation with the IHE Delft Institute for Water Education in the Netherlands and is financed by the Directorate-General for International Cooperation (DGIS) of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. BEWOP focuses on applied research and capacity development to raise awareness and make the implementation of WOPs more effective. As one researcher explained, the project grew out of the failed bid of the Netherlands to host the GWOPA Secretariat:

the BEWOP project is a result of a lost tender procedure. When GWOPA decided to move out of Nairobi and find a new host location, DGIS had wanted to host GWOPA in the Netherlands (at IHE in Delft). However, GWOPA opted for Barcelona. Then DGIS decided that (part of) the funds they had already allocated for the hosting of GWOPA could be used to support the development and work of GWOPA. That is where the BEWOP project comes from. (personal communication, BEWOP researcher, January 2019)

The first phase of the project (BEWOP1, 2013-2015) aimed at “generating a better understanding of the working and functioning of WOPs” (IHE Delft and GWOPA, 2018, 3). The second phase (BEWOP2, 2016-2018) involved the creation of “guidelines, trainings and tools that allow water operators to develop more effective partnerships” (ibid., 3). While the first two phases covered WOPs in general, the third phase (BEWOP3, 2018-2020) focuses specifically on a new set of WOPs under a Dutch program called WaterWorX, discussed in Chapter 4. Key knowledge products from BEWOP1 and 2 include various thematic reports, policy briefs, and tools,¹⁰ as well as a series of six case studies, published between February 2015 and August 2018 (Table 2.5).

¹⁰ BEWOP thematic reports, policy briefs, and tools cover issues such as knowledge management, intercultural skills, asset management, financial analysis, water safety planning, and domestic or “national” WOPs (see also Tutusaus and Schwartz, 2016). The material is available at <https://bewop.un-ihe.org/tools>.

Table 2.5. WOP Case Studies

Series	Date published	Utility partners	Additional/related research
GWOPA: WOPs in Asia	March 2012	City West Water (Australia) Metro-Cebu Water District (Philippines)	
	March 2012	Indah Water Konsortium (Malaysia) PDAM Tirtanadi (Indonesia)	
	March 2012	Vitens Evides International (Netherlands) Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Mongolia)	van Meurs (2010)
GWOPA: WOPs in Africa	November 2013	Vitens Evides International (Netherlands) FIPAG (Mozambique)	Coppel and Schwartz (2011)
	November 2013	Dunea (Netherlands) MWAUWASA (Tanzania) ¹¹	
	April 2014	eThekweni Water and Sanitation (South Africa) Bulawayo City Council (Zimbabwe)	
BEWOP	February 2015	Caesb (Brazil) Aguas del Norte (Argentina)	Carolini et al. (2018)
	February 2015	SIAAP (France) ONEE (Morocco)	
	July 2015	Hunter Water (Australia) Water Authority of Fiji (Fiji)	
	May 2016	COPASA (Brazil) EMSAPUNO (Peru)	
	September 2016	Contra Costa Water District (United States) Belize Water Services (Belize)	Brown (2016); Parmelee (2012); Quinn (2015)
	August 2018	Vitens Evides International (Netherlands) Dawaco (Vietnam)	van Meurs (2010); Wright-Contreras et al. (2020)

Source: The case studies (and corresponding factsheets) can be downloaded at <https://gwopa.org/resources/library/> and <https://oldgwopa.pre.upcnet.es/en/gwopa-news/1826>.

¹¹ This WOP is often showcased for its involvement of trade unions and the attention paid to improving employee satisfaction and working conditions at the mentee utility.

What becomes clear from the case studies is that no two partnerships are the same in terms of scope, activities, interpersonal dynamics, financing arrangements, and outcomes. Identifying “best practices” that hold true across all partnerships is therefore a challenge. While the generalizability of the case studies may be limited, a number of “success factors” emerge that can serve as an orientation for WOP partners and supporting organizations. Success factors for capacity development in WOPs, as identified in the case studies, include: an enabling institutional (legal and regulatory) environment in the mentee’s jurisdiction; careful preparation of the partnership (e.g., by drafting clear, yet flexible, agreements and work plans); managing expectations; tailoring the partnership to the needs of the mentee; context-specific adaptation of the knowledge transferred; sufficient time and availability of all partners, especially also of mentor staff (the mentor should ideally make a long-term commitment); senior management buy-in and leadership; limited turnover of key staff during and after the partnership to ensure sustainability; monetary or in-kind input from all parties to promote a sense of ownership and commitment; good working relations between the partners, characterized by trust, mutual respect, openness, and cultural sensitivity; sufficient funding; and the combination of a WOP with a capital investment program to allow for infrastructural improvements alongside capacity-building activities.

2.2.4.5. WOP Implementation

In addition to knowledge management, advocacy, and resource mobilization, the GWOPA Secretariat sometimes provides direct support to specific partnerships. Between 2013 and 2015, for instance, the secretariat supported nine short-term WOPs between water utilities in Africa. The partnerships, which lasted five to twelve months, were funded by the OPEC Fund for International Development (OFID).¹² The secretariat provided a step-by-step manual, designed to help utility partners formulate so-called Performance Improvement Plans (PIPs).¹³ PIPs are strategic documents “that [outline] technical and capital investment requirements” of mentee utilities and “also help mentees consider how to manage loans and address operational issues” (GWOPA, 2015b). A second round of PIP WOPs began in May 2019, again funded by OFID. GWOPA supports the new partnerships with coordination, organization of technical trainings, and development of interactive platforms, so that utilities can exchange experiences and learn from one another how to do WOPs most effectively (GWOPA, 2019d).

¹² OPEC is the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries.

¹³ A 2014 version of the PIP manual is available at https://bewop.un-ihe.org/sites/bewop.un-ihe.org/files/performance_improvement_plan_manual.pdf.

2.3. WOPs after the MDGs: Sustainable Development and Upscaling

With the MDG era drawing to a close, UNSGAB was dissolved in November 2015. After more than ten years of advisory and advocacy work, the originators of the WOP concept were able to look back on several achievements, one of these being the establishment of GWOPA:

Early on, we focused on urging UN action on the challenges posed by the many thousands of under-performing public, mainly municipal, water and sanitation utilities, as one precondition for meeting the MDG targets for drinking water and sanitation. Our recommendation was eagerly taken up by Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who mandated UN-Habitat to set up the Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance (GWOPA). GWOPA has helped establish dozens of utility partnerships and created regional platforms to stimulate alliances, supported also by development partners. (UNSGAB, 2015, 7)

Building on the successes achieved, the members of UNSGAB called for continued action to address the world's water and sanitation challenges: "Certainly, a lot has been accomplished, but the bucket of water challenges to be solved remains quite full, and the Board's overwhelming concern is that much more has to be done" (UNSGAB, 2015, 4). With the dissolution of UNSGAB, GWOPA lost "a high level international champion," and this loss created some nervousness on the SC about continued political support for the alliance. There were also some optimistic voices, however. One SC member suggested that "GWOPA was originally a recommendation of UNSGAB, [but] it has matured and is no longer dependent on the Board's support" (8th SC meeting, outcome notes, January 2016).

Following the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, a new body – the High-Level Panel on Water (HLPW) – was created in April 2016 by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and World Bank President Jim Yong Kim. Although the lifespan of the HLPW was significantly shorter than that of UNSGAB,¹⁴ it "was seen by many as the post-MDG successor to UNSGAB, given its role of advocating at the highest level for water cooperation to work towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals" (GWOPA, 2016a, 18). In its Action Plan, released in September 2016, the HLPW identifies WOPs as a possible course of action towards sustainable cities and human settlements in the context of SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation (HLPW, 2016, 13).¹⁵ The New Urban Agenda, established at the Habitat III conference in Quito, Ecuador (October 2016), does not mention WOPs explicitly but

¹⁴ The two-year mandate of the HLPW expired in March 2018 (SDGs Knowledge Platform, n.d.a).

¹⁵ SDG 6 comprises eight targets, to be achieved by 2030. Target 6.1 is to "achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all." Target 6.2 is to "achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation." Target 6.A is to "expand international cooperation and capacity-building support to developing countries in water- and sanitation-related activities and programmes" (UNDP, 2020). For discussions of SDG 6, see Herrera (2019) and Wiegler and Bruns (2018).

endorses capacity development for public water and sanitation utilities (paragraph 120); South-South, triangular, and city-to-city cooperation (paragraph 146); and the mechanism of peer-to-peer learning (paragraph 149).¹⁶ Another sign of international recognition came in 2015, when GWOPA was mentioned in a European Parliament resolution¹⁷ on the citizen initiative Right2Water¹⁸ (GWOPA, 2015a, 18). Also, the GWOPA Secretariat was invited to contribute to the *UN World Water Development Report 2016*, which highlights WOPs as a unique tool for capacity development in the water sector:

These solidarity-based partnerships make use of the knowledge and experience of staff in strong utilities to support the development of staff in other utilities that need help. In contrast to technical assistance programmes that rely on external experts to get the job done, WOPs represent more recent thinking on capacity development: they focus on strengthening the capacity of local water and sanitation utility staff members who will still be there years down the line providing services to local populations. (UN-Water, 2016, 95)

In summary, a decade after GWOPA was created, WOPs have become increasingly popular in different world regions and have been recognized for their potential to help meet international development goals (the MDGs and now the SDGs). At the same time, however, the WOP approach still faces some challenges, especially when it comes to implementation at scale. An evaluation report of GWOPA's first five-year strategy concludes that “[t]he increase in the number of WOPs during the Strategy period [2013-2017] has been moderate.... A large scale adoption of WOPs in terms of numbers has not been achieved” (GWOPA, 2018a, 12). The GWOPA Secretariat itself has remarked that “[t]he number of WOPs being implemented globally has grown steadily ... but is still very low compared with the great potential of public utilities collaborating and the real need for capacity to improve and sustain water services by water operators” (Pascual-Sanz et al., 2018, 91).

One major reason for the slow uptake is the limited funding available to WOPs. According to a policy brief prepared for the third Global WOP Congress (GWOPA et al., 2015), WOPs should be attractive in theory because they “are relatively low-cost compared to other forms of technical assistance and capacity development” (ibid., 3).¹⁹ Certain regional development banks, bilateral donors, and multilateral funds

¹⁶ The New Urban Agenda document is available at <http://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/NUA-English.pdf>.

¹⁷ In the resolution from September 8, 2015, the European Parliament “encourages the promotion of public-public partnerships in water facilities in developing countries, in line with the Global Water Operators’ Partnerships Alliance (GWOPA) coordinated by UN Habitat” (paragraph 102). The full resolution is available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:52015IP0294>.

¹⁸ The Right2Water movement formed in 2011 to protest the privatization of water services in relation to the Eurozone crisis and austerity. The movement was particularly active during a EU-wide signature campaign from April/May 2012 to September 2013 (Bieler, 2017; van den Berge et al., 2018).

¹⁹ Most WOPs have direct costs between USD 20,000 and 100,000 (GWOPA et al., 2015, 3).

have financially supported utility partnerships in the past, but overall, “[f]inancing remains a significant obstacle to the wider adoption of WOPs and a limitation to their long-term impact” (ibid., 6). The fact that WOPs are not easy to reconcile with mainstream funding requirements is an important barrier to resource mobilization. Donors “may require their funds to be used with strict time-bounds and for pre-determined outputs,” whereas “a WOP is a relationship that may take time to grow and be subject to the natural ups and downs of human interaction.... imposing strict time and reporting requirements may kill a WOP relationship before it can truly develop” (ibid., 6). With WOPs, it is difficult to demonstrate quick and quantifiable results, but evidence of “effectiveness and value for money” is precisely what most donors would want to see “before committing more funds” (ibid., 6).

A related challenge stems from the fact that the idea of WOPs and GWOPA emerged at the global level, with little involvement from national governments. This is reflected in GWOPA’s organizational structure:

If you look at the way GWOPA is organized, you have the central body up there, then you have the regional platforms.... it’s a top-down approach for now.... [National-level policy-makers] are not properly represented within the current structure of GWOPA.... the ministries, those with the political authority, are not present. (interview, civil society representative B, July 2019)

National decision-makers are not formally represented on the SC, and while awareness of WOPs seems to be growing at the regional level (thanks to the regional platforms), the WOP approach is still not well-anchored in national plans and policy documents.²⁰ If national governments were better represented within GWOPA, “political leaders could also make it part of their plans and then also provide some resources to support some possible WOPs” (interview, civil society representative B, July 2019). As long as the focus remains on the global alliance and the regions, the resources for WOPs are largely limited to donor funds.

2.4. UN Politics and the Fight for GWOPA’s Survival

In addition to funding constraints for WOPs, securing funding for the GWOPA Secretariat has been a recurring challenge. In 2011, only two years after GWOPA was established, civil society organizations, trade unions, and representatives of public water operators picked up on rumors that UN-Habitat was planning to cut the alliance’s funds. In an open letter (dated April 8, 2011), 39 organizations called on UN-Habitat “to maintain its commitment to funding water sector activities and to specifically support the GWOPA in sustaining its capacity” (TNI, 2011). At the fourth SC meeting in Amsterdam in November

²⁰ The situation might be different in the few countries that have national WOP platforms: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Honduras, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, and Pakistan.

2011, a representative from UN-Habitat confirmed the possibility of impending funding cuts: “the Agency [UN-Habitat] has had a change in leadership and is undergoing a significant restructuring process. This process, combined with reduced financial resources to the Agency’s water programmes, may have consequences for the operations of GWOPA” (4th SC meeting, outcome notes, November 2011). When UN-Habitat did in fact end funding support for GWOPA out of its water and sanitation trust fund due to budgetary reductions and changing priorities, GWOPA had to leave Nairobi in search of continuous funding. Following a hosting call, the secretariat moved to Barcelona in 2013 (see Section 2.2.4 above).

Tensions between GWOPA and its host agency flared up again in late 2016, when UN-Habitat tried to appropriate the alliance’s funds in order to address long-standing budgetary deficits:

UN-Habitat upper management was occupied by an executive director who was totally ignorant about water. He was running a deficit budget for almost ten years. By the end of 2016, he wanted to put his hands on GWOPA’s budget and divert it to his central budget. And that practically killed the program. (interview, former GWOPA program manager, January 2019)

UN-Habitat wanted part of the money from GWOPA. The executive director had to be re-elected, and he wanted to have another term, and he wanted to show that he was capable of mobilizing funds for UN-Habitat. Because that was the big critique the donors had there in Nairobi: ‘What are you doing? What can you do about your financial deficit?’ Habitat was in dire straits. And then they [UN-Habitat management] said, ‘Listen, you know, Spain gives money to Habitat, to GWOPA, but we can decide how that money is being spent. That’s our right.’ But, you know, they didn’t read the rules of the UN, because it was earmarked funds. This was earmarked, they could not touch it.... They tried to steal that money from [GWOPA] – or divert it, that’s better language. (interview, former UN-Habitat official, August 2019)

In response to this attempt, 14 SC members, supported by 52 co-signers, published another open letter (dated September 18, 2017), in which they accused UN-Habitat of trying to alter GWOPA’s governance structure and “trying to divert its funds and blocking its fundraising initiatives” (TNI, 2017a). To prevent the GWOPA Secretariat from being turned “into a service provider that charges public utilities for its services” (ibid.), the SC had apparently asked to change host agency in February 2017.²¹ In the letter, UN-Habitat is said to have responded to this request “in a repressive manner” (ibid.), leading the SC to demand immediate changes in the agency’s behavior towards GWOPA. According to one of the organizers of the open letter campaign, the thinking behind the letters was that

²¹ The SC considered the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS) as a potential new host (9th SC meeting, outcome notes, February 2017). This was unacceptable to headquarter staff at UN-Habitat, who regarded the SC’s unilateral action as a violation of UN procedures.

We wanted to have a more open discussion, rather than UN-Habitat harassing ... GWOPA, so then nobody notices and it disappears. That we wanted to avoid. (interview, civil society representative A, October 2018)

As a result of the dispute with UN-Habitat, GWOPA found itself in crisis mode, which severely limited the extent to which it could carry out its functions. Support for new WOPs was reduced and important activities – such as the fourth Global WOP Congress (originally scheduled for December 2017) and the release of a new five-year strategy – had to be cancelled. The alliance was effectively paralyzed, and the secretariat was unable to “do anything except their own survival” (interview, civil society representative A, October 2018). To make matters worse for GWOPA, the hosting agreement with the government of Spain and the city of Barcelona was due to expire in 2017. During the period 2016/17,

there was a great deal of uncertainty into the future of GWOPA.... It was not good for the morale of the staff of GWOPA. [They] could not execute the programs because [they] didn't know what was happening, whether [they] are going to have a host institution or not, whether the program would continue. (interview, Cari-WOP coordinator, May 2019)

Alarmed by the situation, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, Léo Heller, intervened in the dispute. In an open letter (dated November 8, 2017), he urged “all relevant actors involved in the Global Water Operators' Partnership Alliance (GWOPA) to make utmost efforts to maintain the Alliance and to preserve its inspiring spirit” (Heller, 2017). In an interview with me, the Special Rapporteur explained the reasons for his intervention:

I was approached by some [civil society] members of the Steering Committee, very concerned about the continuity of the program. And they were concerned about several issues. One was the funding, the continuity of the funding, by the Spanish government. And the other – I think it was more serious for them – was an impression of a lack of support of the headquarters of UN-Habitat. I believe that this [GWOPA] is an important project and I understand that it would be important to try to support the continuity of the project. This was the reason of my letter.... [WOPs are] a way to show solidarity and to share expertise, South-South or North-South – or even South-North. It's important because it's a way to strengthen public utilities. I believe that public utilities need to have the main role in the water sector.... The traditional narrative of the human right [to safe drinking water] is that the human right is 'agnostic' regarding the type of provider.²² I don't have this feeling. I think we should not be agnostic. Agnostic, I think, is a very extreme concept. The narrative is that we don't care about the process of providing services. What we are interested in are the

²² The first Special Rapporteur, Catarina de Albuquerque, took the view “that human rights are *neutral* regarding economic models and models of service provision” (Baer and Gerlak, 2015, 1533, emphasis added).

outcomes. But I think that the process is also important, not only the outcome. (interview, UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, August 2019)

UN-Habitat did not immediately respond to the open letters (TNI, 2017b), but in late 2017, GWOPA's situation slowly began to improve. In December 2017, the UN General Assembly elected a new executive director for UN-Habitat, who, as an urban planner and former mayor in Malaysia, turned out to be much more receptive to the idea of WOPs.²³ Tensions between GWOPA and UN-Habitat were gradually relieved, and in 2019, the GWOPA Secretariat issued a new five-year strategy for the period 2019-2023 (GWOPA, 2019b). In the strategy, GWOPA is described "as an open global water solidarity network comprised of partners engaged in helping water and sanitation utilities help one another" (ibid., 4). The document once again highlights the unique characteristics of WOPs:

- They focus on building the capacity of resident water operator staff, rather than 'doing it for them.' This way the benefits last.
- They are peer partnerships, meaning that the support comes from professional counterparts with hands-on experience grappling with day to day utility challenges.
- WOPs are carried out on a not-for-profit basis and are not to be used for commercial purposes. (ibid., 13)

The strategy places much emphasis on the upscaling of WOPs, and, given the need for funding, its language seems closely aligned with donor requirements and conditions. For instance, it is stated that "GWOPA will continue to document and demonstrate WOPs' value for money, considering revenue gains but also long-term sustainability benefits" (ibid., 4). Further, GWOPA will "support the collection of more comprehensive and robust information about results that enables better visibility of capacity results" (ibid., 5). With more tangible results at hand, GWOPA hopes that IFIs will increasingly "make use of WOPs to prepare for, accompany or follow up on hardware investments" (ibid., 36).

After GWOPA's reconciliation with UN-Habitat and the release of the new strategy, encouraging signs began to emerge in late 2019: the European Union (EU) announced a new funding program for WOPs

²³ The new executive director attended the tenth SC meeting in Nairobi in person as the chair. At the meeting, she "commended the committee's diversity and expressed her openness to work closely with them [SC members] to achieve the objectives of GWOPA" (10th SC meeting, outcome notes, May 2018).

(GWOPA, 2019c),²⁴ and, after many months of uncertainty, the GWOPA Secretariat managed to find a new host city – Bonn, Germany – from 2020 onwards (GWOPA, 2019a).²⁵

2.5. Conclusion

The concept of WOPs was first proposed by UNSGAB in 2006. Since then, it has been refined and developed to highlight its defining features as a partnership type. In contrast to PPPs and consultancies, WOPs are expected to be carried out on a not-for-profit basis. Instead of replacing utility staff or “doing the work for them,” WOPs aim to build individual and organizational capacity through peer-to-peer knowledge transfer and technical assistance. The main beneficiaries of WOPs are supposed to be public utilities; private operators are allowed to participate as long as they comply with GWOPA’s guiding principles and code of conduct.

In the years since its creation in 2009, GWOPA has established itself as a global alliance under the umbrella of the UN. The UN affiliation, and the formalization of the WOP mechanism, brought international recognition and “convening power,” but it also required compromises along the way, most notably the inclusion of the private sector and a prolonged struggle with UN bureaucracy.

When tensions with UN-Habitat came to a head in 2017, a coalition of civil society groups, trade unions, and public operators mobilized on behalf of GWOPA. Although the open letter campaign was energetically pursued, my interviews with activists reveal yet another set of feelings towards GWOPA: a growing sense of frustration and disillusionment. Chapter 3 investigates this ambivalent stance, which emerged when a public-spirited vision for WOPs was confronted with the political realities of a market-dominated world.

²⁴ The program is expected to start in January 2020. It will be funded by the European Commission’s Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO) and managed by GWOPA. About 20 WOPs between European operators and counterparts in the global South will be supported with a total budget of EUR 5 million. The program builds on an earlier European funding scheme for WOPs: between 2010 and 2017, the EU disbursed EUR 23 million to support 32 capacity-development partnerships in African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries through the ACP-EU Water Facility (Lobina and Hall, 2012).

²⁵ Bonn is already hosting a number of UN organizations (for an overview, see UN Bonn, 2018). According to Herrfahrdt-Pähle et al. (2019, 29), Germany is an important actor in global water governance: the German government “has been pro-actively engaged in promoting water issues and increasing the political recognition of water-related topics at the global level.” Germany’s commitment to the water sector was also reflected in its contributions to UNSGAB for the duration of the board’s existence, from 2004 to 2015 (ibid., 29).

CHAPTER 3

From Radical Alternative to Mainstream Compromise: Pro-Public Struggles

This chapter provides a backstory to the “official” narrative presented in Chapter 2. It exposes the frictions and politics within UNSGAB that eventually gave rise to the WOP concept, and highlights the strategies used by pro-public activists concerned about a misuse of WOPs by the private sector. Many struggles for public water, and against water privatization, have been fought by social movements in international and local forums and in the streets (see Chapter 1). The struggle to safeguard a public orientation of WOPs diverges from common accounts of anti-privatization activism in that it lacked broad-based mobilization and was led by a core of activists working through the formal channels of GWOPA. Activists from civil society and trade unions, supported by other pro-public allies, managed to push for the establishment of an institutional oversight mechanism at the global level. However, the effectiveness of this mechanism remains limited, and some of the activists who used to be deeply involved have grown weary after years of advocacy on behalf of GWOPA. Despite a number of setbacks and disappointments, their actions have done much to draw attention to private water companies trying to use WOPs as a stopgap measure towards privatization.

3.1. PUPs or WOPs? Two Discourses, Two Visions

As mentioned in the previous chapter, UNSGAB was created in 2004 by then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. The members of UNSGAB came from a variety of backgrounds and apparently were selected based on their “proven experience in providing inspiration, moving the machinery of government, and working with the media, the private sector and civil society” (UNSGAB, 2006, 12). However, the inclusion “of a wide range of dignitaries, technical experts, and individuals” (ibid., 12) on the board was far from self-evident at the outset:

it has never been clear how the selection of UNSGAB happened.... It was a nomination of the UN.... in the beginning, there were some critics [arguing] that there was not enough civil society or unions being represented, so they enlarged the group. (interview, former UN-Habitat official, August 2019)

Basically, the creation of UNSGAB was announced as a *fait accompli*, and the membership of UNSGAB was essentially entirely the privatization establishment. There was no one there representing a public-sector point of view or representing the point of view of the considerable number of civil society organizations and trade

unions who felt that water privatization was a really bad idea. The original announcement was of a very one-sided nature.... When they [civil society organizations and trade unions] heard of UNSGAB's proposed composition, they ... collectively said they thought that the UN should be creating a body that represented a broad range of global opinions and interests on this issue, and that therefore, it should include members that could articulate a different perspective. And they were successful in that respect. (interview, researcher B, February 2019)

As suggested in these statements, UNSGAB was initially composed of representatives supportive of privatization. When civil society organizations and trade unions protested against this unbalanced composition, the UN agreed to make the board's membership more inclusive.

Three individuals were chosen to "articulate a different perspective" on the board: David Boys from the global trade union federation Public Services International (PSI), Antonio Miranda from the Brazilian National Association of Municipal Sanitation Operators (ASSEMAE), and Jocelyn Dow from the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO).¹

Early on in the work of UNSGAB, Boys, Miranda, and Dow, in consultation with the groups they were representing, proposed that the board should promote the already existing practice of Public-Public Partnerships (PUPs). Hall et al. (2009, 2) define a PUP in its basic form as "a collaboration between two or more public authorities or organisations, based on solidarity, to improve the capacity and effectiveness of one partner in providing public water or sanitation services." Antonio Miranda took a clear stance on the question of private-sector participation in such partnerships: "The private sector already has more than enough room to promote its business, and worse still, this inclusion may cause more confusion and problems than real benefits" (Miranda, 2007, 69). The proposal of promoting PUPs as a mechanism to reach the MDG water and sanitation target was reportedly debated by UNSGAB, but resistance soon formed among board members close to private water companies:

That proposal was on the table for the first two meetings of UNSGAB [July and December 2004]. And I think it was about the third meeting [November 2005] that it had been refined and was on the verge of being adopted just as Public-Public Partnerships, at which point the multinational companies, who were not at all happy about this, came up with the proposal that it would be wrong to restrict this initiative just to public-sector operators and that private companies should be able to participate as partners, as long as they did so on a not-for-profit basis. And furthermore, they suggested that to clarify, or to remove, the publicness of the idea

¹ David Boys in particular is known to be a vocal critic of water privatization. Canadian activist Maude Barlow, for instance, describes Boys as "a tireless fighter for both public water and public-sector water workers" (Barlow, 2013, 120).

of Public-Public Partnerships, instead of using the term Public-Public Partnerships, they should use the term Water Operator Partnerships. (interview, researcher B, February 2019)

The ideological divisions on the board were pronounced and difficult to bridge. In the end, the pro-public and pro-private factions settled on a compromise: private companies could take part in WOPs if they respected the not-for-profit principle, and those board members opposing private-sector involvement would give up resistance in exchange for the creation of “a UN-sponsored database to facilitate the matching of appropriate utility partners ... that would help promote PUPs” (Boag and McDonald, 2010, 9; see also Hall et al., 2009, 10).

For public-sector proponents, the evident explanation for the inclusion of the private sector was the strong influence wielded by business-friendly members on the board: “UNSGAB was dominated by individuals who are either in the private sector or have supported private-sector participation in the water sector in the past” (Boag and McDonald, 2010, 9). As David Boys, the trade union representative on the board, recalled,

The pro-private members of UNSGAB (in majority) tried to block this [PUP] initiative, but when they saw they didn't have the intellectual resources to counter our arguments, they said that the UN couldn't set up a scheme that would exclude the private sector. (RPWN, 2010, 2)

From the standpoint of the private sector, the proposed partnership mechanism was

a UN-led initiative. It should be open to all. [It is out of the] question that this can be exclusively dedicated to public utilities by themselves. That would be really a shame because there are some private utilities as well that need support or that can provide [support]. Why would you exclude the private sector from being mentors or even mentees? (interview, private-sector representative, August 2019)

With backing from the private sector, the WOP discourse eventually prevailed, although the PUP terminology continued to be used by pro-public scholars and activists, especially in the early years when the contours of the new partnership mechanism were still taking shape. For public-sector proponents, UNSGAB's decision to include private utilities in WOPs was a disappointment and was perceived as a watering down of the original concept, intended to facilitate a non-commercial space for public operators to help one another. When GWOPA was established in 2009, activists were faced with the choice of withdrawal or engagement. Some within the pro-public movement raised strong concerns about the participation of private companies in WOPs:

Private companies have an incentive to treat WOPs as another marketing opportunity to obtain subsequent profitable contracts, and to prevent public sector operators from creating PUPs, as this amounts to an erosion

of the potential commercial market.... If we want to ensure that the WOPs mechanism fulfills the intent of UNSGAB, namely to allow public operators to systematically help each other, then many pro-public actors will need to get involved, at national, regional and global levels. If not, the privates will surely turn this into yet another marketing mechanism. (Hall et al., 2009, 10-11)

In the end, organizations like PSI and the pro-public think tank Transnational Institute (TNI) decided to take the lead and “get involved,” in a “changing the system from within” kind of way:

In a way, we had to accept the compromise, but our strategy [was] then to make it as genuine as possible by engaging in GWOPA. That was the strategy.... Even though we felt that GWOPA is not perfect at all, we couldn't afford losing it. (interview, civil society representative A, October 2018)

[Some pro-public activists] took the view that however limited the public possibilities were under the idea of WOPs and the actual administration of GWOPA, it was nonetheless something that provided opportunities.... [A]s a matter of practical political engagement, [they] decided that it was worth engaging with WOPs and GWOPA because that was better than nothing. (interview, researcher B, February 2019)

[We thought GWOPA might be] providing an alternative to the then-popular PPPs ... in water governance. So the attraction of GWOPA then was that it was offering something quite opposite to the PPPs.... [WOPs are] a very interesting alternative, it's a very interesting approach, something that can help countries build or rebuild their water systems without the threat of privatization or successive commercialization. (interview, civil society representative B, July 2019)

3.2. Integrity

When the first SC was elected in 2009, several pro-public actors became part of the committee: public operators and associations from Argentina, Brazil, India, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, and Uganda were joined by trade union representatives from Argentina and the Netherlands. The Africa Water Network and the Reclaiming Public Water Network (RPWN) were chosen to represent civil society organizations on the SC (GWOPA foundation meeting, outcome notes, January 2009).²

² The RPWN is facilitated by TNI. It was founded in 2005 as “a space ... specifically for knowledge exchange, production, and dissemination on alternatives to privatization” (Wainwright, 2012, 86; see also Terhorst, 2008). Both TNI and the Africa Water Network are partners of the Municipal Services Project (see Appendix I).

3.2.1. Regional Platforms

One issue that occupied the SC from the start was the relationship between GWOPA and the regional platforms. In Asia and Latin America, twinning and peer-learning partnerships – supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) – were already underway before the creation of GWOPA: “in many cases, the formation of regional WOPs preceded the establishment of the Alliance, and hence one did not necessarily inform the other” (GWOPA foundation meeting, outcome notes, January 2009).³ Given the lack of a formal relationship between GWOPA and the platforms, it was not clear whether (1) the platforms knew of the guiding principles; (2) these principles were being respected in the regions; and (3) GWOPA had the authority to enforce them.

To call attention to potential violations of the not-for-profit principle in regional partnerships, the RPWN and PSI together prepared a report, titled *The Politics of Water Partnerships – The Future of WOPs and PUPs*, which “pointed out the contradictory practices in both Asia[n] and Latin American regional process[es]” (Kishimoto, 2014, 4). They planned to disseminate this report at the first Global WOP Congress in Cape Town in 2011, but shortly before the event, the authors changed their minds and decided against publication:

The situation deserved to be criticised but this report would be too provocative at that delicate stage of implementing the GWOPA, and could further isolate NGOs and unions. And we thought we should not send a negative message about the GWOPA in general since the GWOPA is a rare multi stakeholder platform which we can participate in and we should steer it to the right direction by engaging. (ibid., 4)

Instead of releasing the report, the RPWN and PSI “worked further to collect empirical evidence from actual WOPs facilitated by WOP-LAC” (ibid., 4). The resulting discussion paper, published by TNI in 2012, accuses WOP-LAC of undermining the guiding principles of GWOPA by excluding workers and civil society, prioritizing efficiency goals over social considerations, and favoring “commercialised public utilities with aggressive international expansion plans” (Terhorst, 2012, 6). The paper further suggests that WOP-LAC partnerships are predominantly taking place in countries with foreign policy and trade links to the US (ibid., 5), because of the “institutional capture” of the platform “by powerful groups that have a record of promoting neoliberal water sector reforms” (ibid., 1, 3). This statement was directed primarily at

³ The ADB, for instance, started supporting WOPs in Asia and the Pacific in 2007 in response to the Hashimoto Action Plan (interview, ADB lead facilitator for WOPs, May 2019). The regional WOP platform WaterLinks was launched in 2008 (Wright-Contreras et al., 2020, 2).

the IDB, which hosted WOP-LAC in its early years.⁴ The overall concern expressed in the paper is that WOPs might be misused “as a mechanism for promoting neoliberal water sector policies, as well as commercial activity” (ibid., 7).

3.2.2. Integrity Clause

To address concerns over a potential misuse of WOPs for commercial purposes, a group of pro-public representatives on the SC sought to add a “quarantine clause” to GWOPA’s code of conduct. This clause would forbid PPPs and other business interactions between partner operators for a certain time period after a WOP. However, the idea of such a “cooling-off period” was reportedly rejected by private-sector representatives at the second SC meeting in Stockholm in August 2009.

A few months later, in February 2010, RPWN members met in Brussels, Belgium for a strategy workshop to discuss the situation and the way forward. Regarding the “quarantine mechanism,” the workshop minutes record that

The Steering Committee meeting in Stockholm 2009 was very difficult, we tried to obtain the adoption of a quarantine mechanism ... to prevent privates from abusing the scheme (f.i. [for instance] setting up a 2-years WOP then a 25-year concession contract after having collected all the info they need). We asked for a 5-year mechanism, which was massively resisted by pro-business, successfully. (RPWN, 2010, 2)

To appease pro-public voices demanding a “quarantine mechanism,” the SC added the following “integrity clause” to GWOPA’s code of conduct:

Central to WOPs is the sharing of knowledge in a not-for-profit and unrestrained way and built upon the notion of solidarity between utilities. [Their] purpose is to enhance the capacity and capability of public utilities within the guiding principle of integrity. Therefore: The partners agree that no information will be intentionally withheld by any party in anticipation of any commercial gains, and no confidential information of one party will be used by the other party for its commercial advantage. (GWOPA, 2012)

This clause “was adopted by consensus” at the third SC meeting in Stockholm in 2010 (3rd SC meeting, outcome notes, September 2010).

⁴ Criticism of WOP-LAC subsided from 2013 onwards, when the platform moved from the IDB in Washington, D.C. to the Latin American Association of Water and Sanitation Operators (ALOAS) in Argentina. The new hosting arrangement reportedly made WOP-LAC more democratic and participatory as a platform (Carolini et al., 2018, 1161; Kishimoto, 2014, 8-9; Quinn, 2015, 37). WOP-LAC is presently managed by AySA, the public water utility of Buenos Aires that was created after the privatization failure in 2006 (see Chapter 1).

3.2.3. Integrity Sub-Committee (ISC)

To monitor compliance with the “integrity clause” and the other principles of GWOPA, the establishment of an Integrity Sub-Committee (ISC) was proposed as an addition to GWOPA’s existing governance structure. In the eyes of civil society and trade union activists, the proposed ISC was a mere “consolation” for the rejection of the more powerful “quarantine” idea (RPWN, 2010, 2). The defeat of this idea at the second SC meeting was perceived as a serious setback for a strong pro-public WOP mechanism. For the time being, however, there was still enough energy and optimism within the RPWN to keep up constructive engagement: “The rejection of the quarantine clause was unfortunate, but at the Brussels meeting [February 2010], we decided to develop a concrete proposal for the work of this committee, including how it would enforce decisions and how they would hear of abuses” (Kishimoto, 2014, 3).

In preparation for the third SC meeting, the RPWN took the initiative and developed terms of reference for the ISC, complete with a complaint mechanism and possible sanctions (e.g., suspension from GWOPA). However, this version of the terms reportedly met with “opposition from private operators and some financial institutions. The GWOPA secretariat, moreover, feared the proposed ToR [terms of reference] was too strong and would scare off some WOPs stakeholders” (Kishimoto, 2014, 4).

A modified version of the terms was eventually adopted at the fourth SC meeting in Amsterdam in 2011. According to the approved terms, the ISC is to be composed of a subset of SC members from all categories of representation. The terms specify the following role for the ISC: “to help [the] GWOPA secretariat uphold the core values integral to WOPs in order to protect the WOPs name, so that it can continue to serve as a safe and respectable partnership forum” (GWOPA, 2011a, 2). To this end, the ISC is supposed to review the activities of the secretariat and those of specific partnerships, to make sure that these adhere to the guiding principles and the code of conduct.

While the terms describe the composition and tasks of the ISC and the rationale behind its creation, the RPWN’s two main concerns remain largely unaddressed: What would the complaint mechanism for reporting concerns look like? And what would happen, in practice, if a violation of the “integrity clause” or any other principle would be discovered?

Regarding the complaint mechanism, the RPWN and its allies had wanted an open procedure. They had argued that the ISC should be highlighted on GWOPA’s website and that an online complaint form should be provided which would allow anyone, whether they were formally involved in a partnership or not, to submit their concerns to the secretariat. In the end, however, the secretariat “made the complaint mechanism very discrete, almost like the minimum thing of what we [civil society] demanded,” for the

reason that “they [were] very afraid of the mainstream or challenges by the private sector. They were not brave enough” (interview, civil society representative A, October 2018).

Regarding consequences and enforcement, the terms make it clear that the ISC is an advisory body that has no real investigative or enforcement powers (GWOPA, 2011a, 2):

It CANNOT

- Conduct extensive investigation
- Carry out legal action

and it SHOULD NOT

- Hinder good will and participation in WOPs
- Serve to dismiss participation by any parties other than on their misuse or abuse of the WOPs code-of-conduct
- Unnecessarily complicate admission to WOPs

When a concern is identified, all the ISC can do is to make recommendations to the secretariat.

3.3. The First Complaint

The issue of consequences and enforcement was put to the test in January 2016, when four SC members (representing civil society and trade unions) raised a complaint about a WOP between the private utility Sénégalaise des Eaux of Senegal and its mentee REGIDESO of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In a joint open letter (dated January 22, 2016),⁵ the complainants wrote that the WOP had taken place from February 2011 to February 2012, and shortly thereafter, a PPP contract had been concluded between the partners:

Observing the transition from the WOP project to the service contract within the same year (2012), we have to surmise that the commercial contract was obtained in part due to the privileged position as a mentor of the WOP project. We are concerned that this rapid transition from WOP project to commercial contract is against the spirit of integrity, which states: the partners agree that no information will be intentionally withheld by any party in anticipation of any commercial gains, and no confidential information of one party will be used by the other party for its commercial advantage.

A few days after the circulation of the letter, the ISC held a meeting in Barcelona (on the occasion of the eight SC meeting). In the meeting, which took place on January 29, 2016, the ISC decided to request a

⁵ The letter can be accessed at https://www.tni.org/files/article-downloads/letter_of_question_to_sde_concerning_regideso_.pdf.

response from Sénégalaise des Eaux and REGIDESO before taking further action. The question of “what can be the potential consequences of a breach of the code of conduct” was reportedly raised but was not debated further at that point (ISC draft minutes, January 2016). When the ISC came together again a few months later, on June 13, 2016, the “[i]ntegrity concern in [the] WOP between SDE and REGIDESO” was still unresolved. The ISC called for “more fact-finding” before making recommendations on the case. Specifically, the members agreed on two action items: (1) the GWOPA Secretariat would ask for detailed information and documentation from the two operators and the regional platform WOP-Africa; and (2) the ISC would, in its next meeting, issue recommendations and try to identify preventive procedures and lessons learned (ISC draft minutes, June 2016). On February 1, 2017, when the ISC met again on the occasion of the ninth SC meeting, it came to the following conclusion:

This was the third consecutive [ISC] meeting in which a complaint relating to this WOP was discussed. Following examination of the timeline and supporting documents, the [ISC members] unanimously agreed that the time between the WOP and the service contract was ‘too short’ and appeared to contravene the integrity clause in the Code-of-Conduct. The [ISC] acknowledged that while the operators involved in the WOP did not sign the Charter before the WOP was conducted, the Charter existed at the time and would have been known to the utility partners. (ISC draft minutes, February 2017)

Based on this assessment, the ISC formulated two recommendations. First, it recommended that letters be sent to both operators. The letters would raise concerns about “the quick transition from a WOP to a commercial contract” and remind the partners of “the distinguishing features of WOPs.” The second recommendation was to reconsider the idea of “a simple quarantine mechanism that would delimit a time period within which a WOP and a commercial contract would be considered inadmissibly short.” A violation of the specified timeframe could “result in operators being ‘blacklisted’ from the WOP community” (ISC draft minutes, February 2017). As of November 2019, GWOPA had not yet acted on these recommendations, arguably due to its difficult institutional and financial position in 2016/17 (see Chapter 2). According to one of the co-signers of the January 2016 letter, the case nevertheless established an important precedent:

what that also did was that it came to establish the fact that these principles [GWOPA guiding principles and code of conduct] are not just letters printed on paper, but some people are ready to make noise and ensure that they are abided by and kept as intended. (interview, civil society representative B, July 2019)

3.4. Conclusion

Pro-public activists have long called for a mechanism to strengthen the world's public water and sanitation utilities, so that these can deliver better, and more equitable, services to urban populations. PUPs failed to gain the support of UNSGAB, and so, as a compromise, the WOP concept was put forth in 2006.

Given the possibility of private-sector participation in WOPs, public water activists were hesitant to engage with the new partnership initiative. After some consideration, however, a group of committed leaders from civil society, trade unions, and public operators became closely involved in the work of GWOPA. Over the years, this group worked to keep the alliance and the partnerships aligned with the not-for-profit principle and advocated for transparency, solidarity, and integrity in the implementation of WOPs. GWOPA's integrity mechanism became less powerful than activists had hoped, but the existence of the "integrity clause" and the ISC still sends a strong message to the private sector and the water community at large: somebody is watching, and there may be consequences if a breach of GWOPA's principles is discovered.

GWOPA has gone through some difficult times and has not been spared from criticism. While some activists have turned away in frustration, others draw more positive conclusions a decade after the alliance was established:

from a theoretical point of view, I think there are some real tensions within GWOPA. But when you look at it in the bigger picture, they are doing relatively progressive work and they are just doing it on a shoestring, when you compare what the World Bank has to fund its water initiatives. (interview, researcher C, May 2019)

[GWOPA] is a structure *inside* the United Nations. Most of United Nations politics is ... promoting public-private partnerships. So a structure like this one, it's quite rare, unique, and for us, it's very valuable.... The privates, they have their narrative, and their marketing, really developed, and the world is full of that.... And on the other side, I think, the public, we don't have this. We don't have *our* narrative. And the narrative from the public, civil society, should be different. It cannot be in economic terms only. We need to put other things in value [such as ecosystems, the human right to water, citizen control], and we need to explain that to citizens and to people.... GWOPA, [bringing together] water operators, civil society, and trade unions, could be a space to build this narrative. (interview, civil society representative D, December 2019)

[The WOP idea] has not found the steam that will push it and make it a very big, competing idea against PPPs.... we are still waiting for that big take-off. But then, it [GWOPA] has brought some significant changes also, in terms of providing a platform for discussion on alternatives to PPPs. [GWOPA succeeded in] bringing together some stakeholders who before then would not even entertain a discussion at all.... The point of even beginning the discussion, the point of being able to bring the stakeholders together, the point of being able to

keep the stakeholders together from when it began ... I think that's a mark of success of GWOPA. (interview, civil society representative B, July 2019)

One question that repeatedly arose in stakeholder discussions concerns the issue of mentor motivations. Why would water operators assist other providers free-of-charge? “Are they participating for altruistic reasons? Will they share their expertise freely?” (Boag and McDonald, 2010, 9), or are more self-interested considerations driving capacity-development activities in WOPs? As noted in this chapter, those representing pro-public voices on the SC have long feared that mentors – and especially private water companies – would engage in WOPs for commercial reasons, for example to collect information for successive privatization contracts. The official discourse surrounding WOPs does not object to “mutuality of benefit” and “shared incentives” (see Appendices III and IV), but, at the same time, describes WOPs as “*solidarity-based* partnerships” (UN-Water, 2016, 95, emphasis added). Chapter 4 takes a closer look at the question of mentor motivations, to understand whether WOPs are indeed based on an attitude “that values cooperation and interdependency above profit and greed” (Mohanty and Miraglia, 2012, 101).

CHAPTER 4

Between Solidarity and Self-Interest: Mentor Motivations

To contextualize the question of mentor motivations, this chapter begins with a brief theoretical excursion into the motivations behind development assistance. In the International Relations and development geography literatures, the solidarity versus self-interest debate has played out, on a more general level, ever since the “invention of development” (Rist, 2014, 69) after World War II. In recent years, donor states from the global North have been joined by (re-)emerging donors from the global South, as well as by sub-national and non-state actors, in an increasingly heterogeneous and competitive development landscape. These larger shifts are also manifest in WOP practice. Contrary to orthodox assumptions about the locus of development knowledge and expertise, mentor operators not only come from the global North but also from developing countries. In light of their level of involvement, two organizations stand out from the group of mentors: Vitens Evides International (VEI) of the Netherlands and the National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC) of Uganda. While private operators have captured much of the attention in global debates (see Chapter 3), both VEI and NWSC are publicly owned organizations. An analysis of their organizational histories and motivations helps move beyond a narrow focus on the private sector and exposes a number of public-sector trends and developments that could further dilute the WOP approach and its postneoliberal potential.

4.1. Motivations behind Development Assistance: Theoretical Perspectives

4.1.1. Traditional Donors

The concept of development assistance, as conventionally understood today, was born in the presidential inauguration speech of Harry S. Truman, delivered in 1949.¹ In this speech, Truman articulated an “ethical justification for foreign aid” (Hattori, 2003, 229) when he stated that

we must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas.... Our main aim should be to help the free peoples of the world, through their own efforts, to produce more food, more clothing, more materials for housing, and more mechanical power to lighten their burdens.... The old imperialism –

¹ Aid-giving existed before 1949. For instance, the British and the French were channeling aid to their colonies, the US government was supporting agricultural research in Latin America, and the UN and a number of voluntary organizations were engaged in development and humanitarian relief efforts. Truman’s speech is significant in that it marked the starting point for the coordinated and institutionalized provision of foreign aid (Riddell, 2007, 24-26).

exploitation for foreign profit – has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair-dealing. (Truman, quoted in Rist, 2014, 71)

This idealist framing of development assistance did not resonate with International Relations scholars writing at the time of the Cold War. For classical realists such as Morgenthau (1962), foreign aid was an instrument of foreign policy much like military force and diplomacy. Nation-states deployed this instrument strategically in pursuit of their foreign policy objectives (e.g., maintaining influence in former colonies, building alliances with Third World countries, fighting communism). From a realist point of view, foreign aid is not, and should not be, provided for altruistic reasons, but with the aim of maximizing the power and national security of the donor state. Although realism has lost influence in International Relations theory, realist thinking is still echoed in present-day writing on foreign aid. Yanguas (2018, 38-39), for instance, sums up the realist perspective when he states that “[f]or many politicians and policy-makers, foreign aid is just another instrument in the toolkit of foreign policy, which can be wielded to improve trade relations, gain international recognition, or attain regional influence.”

Scholars working in the neo-Marxist tradition likewise question the moral purposes of foreign aid, albeit from a different perspective. Dependency theorists writing in the 1960s and 1970s argued that the situation of underdevelopment in poor countries could not be attributed to domestic conditions, as suggested by modernization theory. Instead, it resulted from a “centuries-long participation in the process of world capitalist development” (Frank, 1966, 21). For dependency theorists, unequal trading relations benefitted advanced capitalist (metropolitan) economies but severely limited development opportunities in poorer (satellite) parts of the world. Underdeveloped countries long served as “the backyard of metropolitan capitalism” (Rodney, 1972/2018, 229), and exploitation by imperialist powers was said to account for much of the development deficit observed in former colonies after independence.

From a dependency perspective, foreign aid thus constitutes a tool to keep poor countries entangled in a capitalist world economy from which they would better disengage. Contrary to Truman’s assertion that the times of “exploitation for foreign profit” would be over, aid is seen as helping donor countries enrich themselves at the expense of recipients, whether by providing access to raw materials, opening up export markets, providing profitable investment opportunities, or creating employment for Western workforces. In the words of Amin (2009, 68), development assistance, “in reality, is not aid from North to South but, rather, the reverse.”

The phenomenon of “tied aid” is often cited as an example of the ways in which development assistance results in economic benefits for donor countries. Aid critic Dambisa Moyo offers the following interpretation:

Donors have tended to tie aid in three ways. First, it is often tied to procurement. Countries that take aid have to spend it on specific goods and services which originated from the donor countries, or a group selected by them. This extends to staff as well: donors employ their own citizens even when suitable candidates for the job exist in the poor country. Second, the donor can reserve the right to preselect the sector and/or project that their aid would support. Third, aid flows only as long as the recipient country agrees to a set of economic and political policies. (Moyo, 2010, 38-39)

In 2001, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC)² issued a recommendation that its member countries “untie” their development assistance, as “tied aid” was found to inflate project costs and curtail the choices available to recipients (OECD, 2019b). This recommendation has never been fully implemented (Riddell, 2007, 99-100). Still, the 2000s saw “traditional” (DAC) donors adopt “ostensibly more altruistic, poverty-driven agendas” (Mawdsley et al., 2018, O30), as reflected in the MDGs and the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness: “Together they assembled a particularly strong framing of (Northern) aid as a disinterested and fundamentally virtuous transfer of funds and expertise to solve poverty” (Mawdsley, 2018, 176).

At present, however, foreign aid seems to be moving away from this paradigm and towards a “retroliberal” aid regime in which “tied aid,” private-sector involvement, and growth-centered policies are making a comeback (Mawdsley et al., 2018; Murray and Overton, 2016). Pressured by the impacts of the 2008 financial crisis, the rise of nationalist voices, and the (re-)emergence of donors from the global South, governments in countries such as the UK, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands are increasingly pursuing an agenda where “aid is once again being explicitly harnessed to ‘national’ self-interest,” for example to promote international trade and investment opportunities for privileged domestic actors (Mawdsley et al., 2018, O40). Besides the advancement of economic interests, donors emphasize gains in “soft power” and national security, as well as reduced risks thanks to “global public goods,” as justifications for their foreign aid spending (Mawdsley, 2017).

4.1.2. Southern Donors

As mentioned above, the recent shift among DAC donors – from a focus on poverty alleviation (back) to a concern primarily with national self-interest – is partly ascribed to the rise of Southern development actors such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). While the DAC donors at first expected to teach Southern donors “the proper conduct and principles of donorship,” the BRICS and other “non-

² The DAC is part of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). As of 2019, 29 high-income countries, plus the EU, were members of the DAC (OECD, 2019a).

traditional” donors have proven fairly resistant to such “co-option” attempts (Mawdsley, 2018, 176). Rather than the South moving closer to the North in terms of development policy norms and practices, the North, at least in some respects, now seems to be emulating the South in order to maintain its relevance in a changing development landscape.

Meanwhile, the precise characteristics and consequences of Southern aid and development cooperation are still a matter of debate (e.g., de Haan, 2011; Manning, 2006; Mawdsley, 2012; Quadir, 2013; Six, 2009; Woods, 2008), and the question of motivations figures prominently in this conversation. Reflective of the realist approach, some – especially early observers and conservative commentators – have argued that the rising powers provide aid first and foremost to promote their own ideologies, political influence, and economic standing, with little concern for the existing global order or the fate of local populations (e.g., Naím, 2009). Others – including Southern governments themselves – have advanced a different narrative about Southern aid, at least in the early years of the resurgence of South-South cooperation (Engel, 2019; Mawdsley, 2019). In this narrative, principles such as non-interference, horizontality, friendship, and solidarity take center stage (Lauria and Fumagalli, 2019). South-South solidarity is said to be “rooted in common historical experiences” (Aneja, 2019, 145), or in “a shared experience that involves common hardship” (Nel and Taylor, 2013, 1091), most notably the experience of colonial rule and resistance. Resulting attitudes of empathy and respect are portrayed as leading to more balanced cooperation and genuine partnerships, as opposed to relations characterized by hierarchical domination. In this reading, South-South cooperation constitutes a form of emancipation that breaks with existing power relations and opens up alternative development trajectories (Gray and Gills, 2016).

4.1.3. Sub-National and Non-State Actors

Apart from Southern donors, sub-national and non-state (private) actors have come to play an increasingly important role in development cooperation. After World War II, “municipal twinning” between local and regional governments in different countries was seen as a way “to promote peace and unity and to develop intercultural ties, promote international solidarity and build institutional capacity” (OECD, 2018b, 25). Such twinning activities are now subsumed under the broader term “decentralized development cooperation.” Local and regional governments normally take the lead in decentralized cooperation but can be joined by non-state actors in multi-stakeholder constellations (Hafteck, 2003; OECD, 2018b).

A separate and growing body of scholarship has examined the role of non-state actors in the development field. The literature on philanthropic foundations and multinational corporations suggests that intersecting motives of humanitarianism and profit making – captured in concepts such as “philanthrocapitalism” and

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) – are present also within this group of development players (e.g., Black and O’Bright, 2016; Haslam, 2012, 209; McGoey, 2015). For non-profit organizations (Smith, 1990), the main tensions are between pursuing purely humanitarian versus political objectives, and between preserving autonomy versus acting as government “appendages” (ibid., 180) or “surrogates for implementing sensitive foreign-policy agendas” (ibid., 216) in exchange for public subsidies.

In a study of development volunteers in Tanzania, Eriksson Baaz (2005) explores the tensions between solidarity and self-interest at the level of the individual. Solidarity, for European development workers, means “[relating] to colleagues at their level” (ibid., 85) and showing “identification with the partners” (ibid., 103). However, faced with obvious differences in material wealth, many volunteers display “a constant vacillation, with solidarity and altruism simultaneously disavowed and embraced” (ibid., 90).

4.2. Mentors in Water Operator Partnerships: A Global Snapshot

As the preceding section suggests, several changes have taken place in the landscape of development since the 1950s, and academic perspectives on development assistance (and the purposes and motivations associated with it) have evolved accordingly. Today, the DAC members share the stage with Southern countries, regional and local governments, and private actors as donors and development partners. These shifts reverberate through many sectors of development, including water supply and sanitation.

The WOP database, introduced in Chapter 2, shows that water and sanitation operators based in the global North (e.g., in the Netherlands, France, Spain, and Belgium) have been active in WOPs as mentors, but the same applies to water and sanitation utilities from developing countries (e.g., from Uganda, Malaysia, Colombia, Burkina Faso, Brazil, the Philippines, and Morocco). What becomes clear is that water and sanitation operators in the global South are not simply playing the role of passive “recipients” or “beneficiaries” in WOPs but are actively sharing their knowledge and expertise with colleagues and counterparts in other places (Beck, 2019; see also Carolini et al., 2018; Pascual-Sanz et al., 2018).³

Although private operators have been at the center of critical attention, few seem to be engaging in WOPs on a regular or systematic basis. Ranhill Utilities Berhad of Malaysia and Maynilad Water Services of the Philippines are among those doing so.⁴ Other private water companies have been mentors in WOPs as well, albeit in fewer partnerships. Examples are Aguas Andinas (Chile), Manila Water Company (the

³ For a map of South-South WOPs, see Chapter 2, Figure 2.3.

⁴ Maynilad Water Services does much of its mentoring and other capacity development through a dedicated facility, called the Maynilad Water Academy, see <http://www.mayniladwateracademy.com/>.

Philippines), and Sénégalaise des Eaux (Senegal).⁵ One partnership of Sénégalaise des Eaux was under scrutiny by the ISC in 2016/17, as discussed in Chapter 3.

Judging by the number of WOPs mentored, two publicly owned organizations stand out as the leading mentors in North-South and South-South WOPs, respectively: VEI of the Netherlands and NWSC of Uganda (Beck, 2019, 5, 7). VEI has served as a mentor in numerous partnerships in the global South, with a geographical focus on anglophone countries in Eastern and Southern Africa. It is further consolidating its leading role as a mentor thanks to a new program called WaterWorX, undertaken in cooperation with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (see Section 4.3.4 below). According to Wright-Contreras et al. (2020, 5), “VEI is the most active organization promoting North-South development cooperation” through WOPs. NWSC, for its part, has been a mentor to operators in various Sub-Saharan African countries, including Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Zambia.

In the remainder of this chapter, I examine both organizations, and the motivations behind their involvement in WOPs, in more detail.

4.3. Vitens Evides International (VEI)

VEI was established in 2005 as a subsidiary of the Dutch drinking water companies Vitens and Evides.⁶ It is a not-for-profit public limited company based in Utrecht (Figure 4.1), with an annual turnover of approximately EUR 20 million. In addition to the parent companies and shareholders Vitens and Evides, three Dutch water companies are presently affiliated with VEI: Brabant Water, WML, and Waterbedrijf Groningen (Table 4.1).⁷ The five remaining water companies of the Netherlands – PWN, Dunea,

⁵ The WOP database indicates the following numbers of partnerships mentored: Ranhill Utilities Berhad: 8; Maynilad Water Services: 4; Aguas Andinas: 2; Manila Water Company: 2; and Sénégalaise des Eaux: 2. This adds up to 18 partnerships, accounting for 8.5 percent of the 211 partnerships recorded as of July 2018.

⁶ Vitens founded Vitens International in the early 2000s. In 2005, Evides joined and Vitens International became VEI (interview, former VEI manager, November 2019).

⁷ Since 2018, VEI has a sixth member: Water Laboratorium Noord (WLN). WLN is a water laboratory owned by Waterbedrijf Groningen and WMD. It is a small company in the north of the Netherlands that conducts laboratory tests for the Dutch water companies. By joining VEI, WLN now also has the possibility of sending staff abroad, mainly to assist with projects that have a water quality component.

Waternet, Oasen, and WMD (Table 4.2) – have, for the time being, chosen to stay independent,⁸ although they do participate in the joint WaterWorX program, described below.

Figure 4.1. VEI Headquarters in a Former Vitens Building in Utrecht



Source: Photo by author, August 2019.

⁸ PWN joined VEI in 2014/15 but left again in 2016 when a new CEO took charge. The new CEO of PWN wanted to have a greater say in, and take more responsibility for, her company’s international activities, rather than “sponsoring VEI” (interview, PWN project manager, November 2019). Only Vitens and Evides are shareholders of VEI. They are therefore entitled to make all major decisions on international projects, also regarding finances. The affiliated water companies do not have any formal decision-making powers. To make the affiliated water companies feel more included, VEI recently changed its name from “Vitens Evides International” to “VEI Dutch Water Operators.” Yet some of the Dutch water companies prefer to stay independent. One water company representative explained the pros and cons of joining VEI as follows: “If you join VEI, you are part of a bigger group, so it’s easier to do your program. But if you are alone, you are more flexible, and you have more input in the things you are doing in the field.... We want to be responsible for our own [activities] and we want to have this flexibility. It’s like with a supermarket: if you are part of a big franchise, you have to follow the rules of the franchise. Same with do it [WOPs] independently or do it together with VEI” (interview, Oasen international program coordinator, January 2020).

Table 4.1. VEI Shareholders and Affiliated Water Companies: Select Characteristics (2016)

	Employees (FTE)	Network length (km)	Connections	Water production (million m ³)	Turnover (million EUR)
Vitens	1,225	47,303	2,550,000	352	354
Evides	560	13,473	1,033,000	168	198
Brabant Water	689	18,139	1,145,000	181	163
WML	387	8,782	544,000	71	99
Waterbedrijf Groningen	216	5,085	285,000	44	45
Total	3,077	92,782	5,557,000	816	859

Source: VEWIN (2017, 10: Table 1.2, 11: Table 1.3). Note: FTE = Full-Time Equivalent.

Table 4.2. Non-Affiliated Water Companies: Select Characteristics (2016)

	Employees (FTE)	Network length (km)	Connections	Water production (million m ³)	Turnover (million EUR)
PWN	503	9,948	798,000	90	174
Dunea	495	4,834	629,000	79	132
Waternet	386	3,130	500,000	91	102
Oasen	251	4,203	347,000	41	68
WMD	144	5,164	202,000	34	30
Total	1,779	27,279	2,476,000	335	506

Source: VEWIN (2017, 10: Table 1.2, 11: Table 1.3). Note: FTE = Full-Time Equivalent.

With half of the ten Dutch water companies on board, VEI considers itself “firmly rooted in the Dutch water sector” (VEI, 2018b). According to VEI, the Dutch water companies “have established themselves as the best in-class” when it comes to water service provision, and VEI is proud to be sharing their “competence and expertise” with other operators abroad (VEI, 2017, 6). In its 2018 annual report, VEI describes itself as “the largest organization involved in Water Operator Partnerships worldwide” and as “the world’s leading promotor and implementor of WOPs” (VEI, 2018a, 6, 8).

In contrast to more open-ended “twinning” arrangements, VEI expresses a clear preference for structured, long-lasting partnerships (five years or more) that are oriented towards delivering results – and results not just in terms of individual learning but also in terms of organizational capacity building and performance, measurable by Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).⁹

Apart from being highly structured and results-oriented, VEI’s partnerships are characterized by a combination of short-, medium-, and long-term staff. VEI’s “core business,” according to the company’s publicity materials, “is to provide operational expert support via short, medium and long term assignments to its partners” (VEI, 2018b). VEI as an organization consists of 71 staff members (Table 4.3). 22 of these are based at the headquarters in Utrecht, while the remaining 49 are working at partner utilities in the field (e.g., as regional team leaders, Resident Project Managers (RPMs), project experts, young experts, or support staff). Since 2018, VEI can hire personnel directly and has done so for most of the headquarter positions. Most of the field staff is still seconded from the five water companies or sourced externally.

Table 4.3. VEI Staff Breakdown

	Headquarters	Field	Total
Direct hire	14	2	16
Secondment	5	18	23
External hire	3	29	32
Total	22	49	71

Source: VEI organizational chart, April 2019.

Note: Table 4.3 does not include short-term experts.

⁹ KPIs are widely used by mainstream actors to assess and compare water utility performance. The idea of comparative performance assessment using KPIs originates in the private sector and is called “benchmarking.” KPIs tend to focus on the measurement of technical and financial aspects, while social objectives are often marginalized in existing evaluation frameworks (McDonald, 2016a).

According to its model, VEI posts RPMs directly within partner utilities abroad. As long-term experts residing in the host countries and working in the respective mentee utilities, the RPMs have regular interaction with local counterparts. For example, they take part in management meetings and monitor progress on capacity-building activities. Another part of their job is to coordinate and evaluate the visits of short-term experts from the participating water companies in the Netherlands. In 2016 alone, 359 short-term missions took place, with the “top 5 destinations” being Kenya, Malawi, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and Mozambique (VEI, 2016, 8). Ideally, the same short-term expert returns to the same partner utility several times, to allow for the building of trust and relationships. Vitens, the largest of the Dutch water companies, sent 49 short-term experts on 97 missions in 2017, and 73 short-term experts on 116 missions in 2018 (VEI, 2019, 3). In 2018, Dutch experts spent over 3,000 days on short-term missions abroad (VEI, 2018a, 6, 13).

These missions, which normally last between two and three weeks, are meticulously scheduled by the water companies in the Netherlands, often a year in advance: “The year before, all the [RPMs] have to send in, to VEI, how many missions they need, how many short-termers they need, what are the qualifications they need. They have to send it in one year upfront” (interview, former Brabant Water international projects manager, August 2019). The reason is that “the work here in the Netherlands has to go on also” while staff members are spending time abroad. If an RPM cannot stick to the schedule agreed, “then nobody is coming. Then the RPM will have to wait till next year. We always try to solve it, but sometimes, we really can’t solve it” (interview, former WML CEO, August 2019).

Occasional scheduling difficulties notwithstanding, the RPM model is one of the reasons why Brabant Water, WML, and Waterbedrijf Groningen decided to collaborate with VEI.¹⁰ The presence of long-term resident managers is highly appreciated by these water companies, as the RPMs provide a level of continuity and can offer personal and professional guidance to short-term experts, making sure that the missions run smoothly. VEI also takes care of briefing short-term experts on safety issues before they depart and arranges itineraries with a professional travel agency. Such services and standardized procedures make VEI very attractive, especially for the smaller Dutch water companies that would otherwise have to spend limited time and resources on partnership administration and logistics. For

¹⁰ In contrast, some of the water companies not affiliated with VEI decided against the RPM model. PWN, for instance, works with locally-hired project coordinators rather than expatriate RPMs in its WOPs in Rwanda and Senegal, for reasons including cost savings, sustainability of change, and the remote (rural) location of the partner utilities (interview, PWN project manager, November 2019). Oasen only sends short-term experts to its partner utility in Sragen, Indonesia and does not use any permanent staff at all, whether expatriate or local, due to financial constraints and Oasen’s goal to encourage a sense of partner ownership and control (interview, Oasen international program coordinator, January 2020).

example, Waterbedrijf Groningen decided to join VEI in 2014, hoping to “professionalize” its partnership activities:

Because we are such a small company, we are not going to do everything ourselves. It’s a bit next to your normal work, you are doing something somewhere, and we can better professionalize it and also make use of all the experiences of other people who went to other countries and work together. So we decided to participate in VEI because we are small and we wanted to professionalize our international [activities]... [People from VEI] plan everything with the RPMs. They make the programs, really tight and efficient. It’s really professional. They do the reporting. They have the contacts. It’s really a professional organization. (interview, Waterbedrijf Groningen CEO, August 2019)

For VEI, WOPs are not side projects or a form of “hobbyism” (interview, VEI CEO, August 2019). Rather, the partnerships are approached as professional activities that constitute the company’s sole reason for existence. The second Global WOP Congress report summarizes a presentation given by one of VEI’s regional managers:

WOPs can respond to real demand by utilities ... however to boost the impact of these partnerships they need to be professionalized.... First, WOPs should use an output-oriented model, with their financing predicated on results achievements that can be observed in changes in Key Performance Indicators. They also require robust monitoring systems for greater transparency and accountability.... It was pointed out that developing clear terms of reference and planning the expert inputs well in advance as well as the logistics was very important. An assessment of expert competencies in the beginning and evaluation of performance after a WOP would greatly aid in knowing where the shortcomings were. While putting emphasis on results may be at odds with slower but more sustainable capacity development ... WOPs should nevertheless move toward an output-based model. (GWOPA, 2014, 19-20)

VEI’s “professionalized” and “output-based” approach can be especially beneficial when it comes to project acquisition, as it may enhance the company’s appeal among domestic and international donors. Apart from Dutch-funded programs like WaterWorX (see Section 4.3.4 below), VEI competes for capacity-building projects tendered by donors like the World Bank and the European Investment Bank (EIB). Compared to the individual water companies, VEI stands much better chances of winning such projects thanks to its professional image (including the use of KPIs) and its organizational scale. VEI also has a team of staff dedicated to proposal writing and a large database of previous proposals to draw on, an advantage that the smaller water companies by themselves do not have. Such resources are essential, however, when competing against private multinationals on the international market.

4.3.1. Territorial Expansion

As indicated above, the Dutch water supply sector today consists of a small number of drinking water companies, but this has not always been the case. In 1938, there were 232 water utilities operating in the Netherlands (Blokland and Schwartz, 2013, 150). Due to multiple pressures (service expansion, and later a drive for efficiency and competitiveness), the number of utilities has gradually been reduced since then by means of mergers, with only ten companies remaining at present (Blokland and Schwartz, 2013; Schwartz, 2011; VEWIN, 2017, 10-11). All but one of the ten Dutch water companies are legally organized as public limited companies (Schwartz and Blokland, 2002; VEWIN, 2017, 10).¹¹ They operate under private company law but are fully owned by public shareholders (provinces and municipalities), as water services privatization is not allowed in the Netherlands.¹²

With only ten companies left and universal service coverage achieved, the opportunities for additional efficiency gains via mergers and upscaling are few. Consequently, the water companies have begun to explore opportunities abroad: “With a limited potential of increasing their scale of operations in the Netherlands, water utilities are increasingly trying to internationalize their activities in order to grow” (Blokland and Schwartz, 2013, 153).

Furlong (2015) terms this phenomenon “territorial expansion” and illustrates it with a case study of WMD, one of the smaller water companies serving the northeastern province of Drenthe. In the 1990s, WMD began buying shares in water utilities in Indonesia. One of the reasons for WMD’s outward expansion was the perception that “water supply markets of the Netherlands and surrounding countries ... are ‘saturated’” (ibid., 202) and offer no more possibilities to grow. The joint ventures entered into by WMD in Indonesia originally had a time span of 15 years but were terminated early. When it became clear that WMD would not recoup the millions of (public) euros invested in Indonesian water utilities, the company was forced to withdraw from its international activities and is now facing legal proceedings in the Netherlands (Ophof, 2019).¹³ Another example of internationalization is provided by the case of Vitens International,¹⁴ which, together with South Africa’s Rand Water Services, was involved in a

¹¹ The exception is Waternet (serving Amsterdam), which is a foundation (VEWIN, 2017, 10).

¹² The law prohibiting water privatization in the Netherlands dates from 2004 and “prevents any privately owned company from providing drinking water services to the public” (Hall et al., 2004, 3).

¹³ Because of the WMD incident, the Dutch water companies have become very reluctant when it comes to investing abroad, and most seem to adhere to the credo “don’t take risks with the money from the customers” (interview, former Brabant Water international projects manager, August 2019). The exception is PWN, which still holds shares in water companies in Rwanda and Senegal through its subsidiary Aquanet. As far as VEI is concerned, the company seeks to minimize financial risk by “[n]ot participating or taking any financial position in local water operating partners” (VEI, 2018a, 21).

¹⁴ Vitens International was the predecessor of VEI, see Note 6 above.

management contract in Ghana from 2006 to 2011 (e.g., Dagdeviren and Robertson, 2013, 2014; Hirvi and Whitfield, 2015; Mvulirwenande et al., 2019; van Rooyen and Hall, 2007; Yeboah, 2006).¹⁵

4.3.2. Staff Development and Recruitment

Based on my interviews with VEI's management team and representatives of the affiliated water companies, the most important motivation behind VEI's engagement in WOPs is not international expansion, however, but staff development and recruitment (see also Blokland and Schwartz, 2013, 154; Furlong, 2015, 203; Martins de Andrade, 2010, 67-73):

The goal why we are doing it, the water operator partnerships, international development, is of course helping the water companies abroad, but also developing our own personnel and giving them a challenge and [opportunities for] out-of-the-box thinking.” (interview, former Brabant Water international projects manager, August 2019)

Due to differences in operational procedures and technical equipment used, experts from the Netherlands tend to gain little technical knowledge at the partner utilities that could be applied in their companies back home. What they do bring back, however, are so-called soft skills – “knowledge about how to communicate with other people, how to give a presentation, how to give proper advice, how to be flexible” (lecture, VEI CEO, June 2018). Soft skills also include “competencies like coaching, or being creative, or improvising, and also getting a bigger picture of utilities” (interview, VEI regional manager A, June 2018). Other skills employees can develop abroad are related to problem solving:

[When we go abroad] we also learn how to make a good analysis, to look at different perspectives to solve a problem, to see what perspective is the most helpful or fits best to the problem that there is, and then we start solving the problem. (interview, former WML CEO, August 2019)

Apart from developing new skills (e.g., leadership, analytical, problem-solving), employees who travel on missions abroad often return refreshed and with heightened levels of satisfaction, dedication, and appreciation for their jobs. Giving advice and solving problems with others can be a highly rewarding experience. When confronted with the daily realities of water provisioning in developing countries, they may recall once more the fundamental importance of water for life and the remarkable service standards reached in the Netherlands, an achievement that is easily taken for granted within the confines of Western Europe. After spending time abroad, “they come back and they see everything far more realistic and they don't stick at minor issues. They see the [big picture]. Really, it's helpful” (interview, Waterbedrijf

¹⁵ For the developments leading up to the management contract in Ghana, see Amenga-Etego and Grusky (2005).

Groningen CEO, August 2019). Providing opportunities for international exposure outside the Netherlands is considered especially important for more experienced staff members, many of whom have stayed at the same water company for much of their professional working lives:

[People] tend to stay for a very long time at the utility – 40 years, 30 years, 20 years. If you are working for a utility, people are seldom going away and work somewhere else.... That is complicated for an employer, because, how do you keep them inspired? How do you still make them a little bit dynamic? So they [the water company CEOs] use WOPs for the older generations – and there are a lot of them – to get them a new opportunity. (lecture, VEI CEO, June 2018)

Other interviewees confirmed the staff-related benefits of WOPs:

Our interest is that WOPs are a HR [human resources] instrument for experienced professionals as well as for new recruits. Employees feel excited and proud once being asked to share their working experience with their peers abroad. They return highly inspired – they shine! So for us, it is a valuable HR instrument to make people strong, flexible, and eager to learn. (interview, VEI regional manager B, November 2018)

What do you do when you are an engineer at a Dutch water utility? You look at your screen, everything goes well. So for them, to work for two weeks or three weeks in Papua New Guinea or Malawi, and going back to the fundamentals, it's a very motivating thing for staff. (interview, former UN-Habitat official, August 2019)

Besides staff development, WOPs can help attract new talent into the water sector. VEI explicitly includes this in its mission statement, one element of which is to enhance “the reputation ... of the Dutch water operators ... as an attractive employer” (VEI, 2018c, 4). In 2014, the average age of the workforce in the Dutch water sector stood at 47.9 years (Honcoop and Tom, 2015). The future of the water companies in the Netherlands thus depends on recruiting qualified young professionals who will take up the positions of those soon going into retirement. Conscious of the aging problem, the water companies strategically market WOPs towards young people, to increase the odds that they will opt for a career in the water sector:

WOPs are a convincing sales argument to recruit and engage young people for the water sector. Working in a water company is not extremely sexy. There are more fancy organizations to work for. Our pitch to new recruits is that they are to be ready to share knowledge and expertise abroad. This proposition is appealing to the new generation of young professionals. (interview, VEI regional manager B, November 2018)

If I have people apply for a job at our company, I always say, ‘And you can also be able to go over there [to Mozambique or to Tanzania].’ [Some applicants] find it a great opportunity. So also because of employee reasons, employment, it's a very good extra. (interview, Waterbedrijf Groningen CEO, August 2019)

Finally, Martins de Andrade (2010) speculates on a third HR-related function of WOPs: WOPs may take up surplus staff that exists because of past mergers. Deploying excess staff members abroad might offer the opportunity to keep them usefully employed and have their salaries covered through external funding schemes. Staff reductions can be difficult from both a legal and an interpersonal standpoint, and “waiting for retirement age [e.g., as an RPM overseas] is sometimes less costly than ... layoff, for the companies” (ibid., 73). Indeed, the fact that the five water companies of VEI were able to spare employees for more than 3,000 mission days in 2018 raises the question of whether WOPs act as an “absorption mechanism” for some staff-related inefficiencies (e.g., overstaffing).

4.3.3. Customer Relations and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

VEI reports that customers are generally highly supportive of partnership activities in poorer countries. The partnerships with water operators in Africa, Asia, and Latin America add to the corporate image of the Dutch water companies, which, in turn, can help communicate with customers, reach corporate targets, and attract new staff (see also Martins de Andrade, 2010, 87-89).

At the same time, the water companies are modest in advertising their partnerships as CSR, for fear that ratepayers, shareholders, or the political tide might turn against international activities (which might be perceived by some as diverting resources away from the water companies’ core responsibilities in the Netherlands). Towards domestic constituencies, the water companies tend to keep a low profile and try to avoid “[rocking] the boat too much” (interview, VEI CEO, August 2019). Uniting a “critical mass” of water companies, VEI lends a certain degree of legitimacy to formerly disparate international activities in the Dutch drinking water sector. Being part of VEI offers the individual water companies a form of protection against criticism that may flare up within more conservative segments of the Dutch public:

[The other water companies may want to join VEI] to reduce their risk, because if you are abroad, you can be in the limelight. People can say, ‘Why are you working abroad? You are a Dutch water company. You should only concern yourself with the people in the Netherlands and why are you [going overseas]?’ So they [the affiliated water companies] said, ‘Well, maybe we still would like to do that, we have our own CSR agenda, so for us, it’s safer to go under the wings of Vitens Evides International.’ (interview, VEI CEO, August 2019)

To date, the international activities of the Dutch water companies have not been questioned by customers or the general public. But with WMD’s failure in Indonesia in the news and right-wing parties on the rise in several European countries, including the Netherlands, the water companies are thinking about possible strategies to justify and defend their international involvement.

4.3.4. Sustainable Development

According to a law from 2011, the Dutch water companies are permitted to spend up to one percent of their estimated annual turnover on drinking water projects abroad.¹⁶ Thanks to this possibility, and additional support through the Water for Life Foundation (which collects voluntary customer donations), the water companies are in the comfortable position to be able to cover much of the costs of WOPs themselves, without having to comply with donor requirements.¹⁷ As long as the Dutch parliament does not revoke the “one percent” law, the water companies need not engage in donor fundraising for WOPs, as they can fund the partnerships out of their own revenues.

VEI nevertheless tries to win external funds in order to increase the scale and impact of its international activities. One example of donor funding is a major new program called WaterWorX. WaterWorX is a joint undertaking of the Dutch water companies and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. It was launched in The Hague in March 2017. The WaterWorX program originates in a policy target set in 2015 by Lilianne Ploumen, then Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation. The target for the Netherlands, inspired by SDG 6, was to “ensure that in 2030, 30 million people will have sustainable access to drinking water and 50 million people will have access to proper sanitation” (VEI, 2017, 8).

To put the Minister’s water and sanitation pledge into action, the Dutch government formulated a Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) strategy for 2016-2030. WaterWorX is intended to contribute to this strategy by implementing 25 WOPs between the water companies of the Netherlands and partner operators in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Table 4.4). The “X” in WaterWorX represents the Roman numeral X (10) and “stands for all 10 Dutch water operators that join forces,¹⁸ and a target to provide 10 million people with access to water services” (VEI, 2017, 9). According to GWOPA (2019b, 36), WaterWorX represents “the most ambitious global WOP initiative led by a single country to date.”

¹⁶ Article 8.2, *Drinkwaterbesluit van 23 mei 2011*, available at <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0030111/2018-07-01>. A similar mechanism for water cooperation exists in France (GWOPA et al., 2015, 5; OECD, 2018b, 138-139; Pascual-Sanz et al., 2018, 91) and is currently under consideration in Finland (GWOPA, 2020).

¹⁷ The water companies are of course still accountable to their (public) shareholders.

¹⁸ WMD nominally participates in WaterWorX but is presently not contributing any resources due to its troubled history in Indonesia (see Section 4.3.1 above).

Table 4.4. WaterWorX WOPs

	Project title	Country	Dutch partner
1	WOP Acuavalle	Colombia	VEI
2	WOP Addis Ababa	Ethiopia	VEI
3	WOP Oromia	Ethiopia	VEI
4	WOP Ghana	Ghana	VEI
5	WOP Semarang	Indonesia	VEI
6	WOP Nakuru	Kenya	VEI
7	WOP Lilongwe	Malawi	VEI
8	WOP Zomba	Malawi	VEI
9	WOP Mandalay	Myanmar	VEI
10	WOP Philippines	Philippines	VEI
11	WOP Arusha	Tanzania	VEI
12	WOP Mwanza	Tanzania	VEI
13	WOP Kampala	Uganda	VEI
14	WOP Mekong Delta	Vietnam	VEI
15	WOP Nkana and Choma	Zambia	VEI
16	WOP Bulawayo	Zimbabwe	VEI
17	WOP Harare	Zimbabwe	VEI
18	WOP Aquavirunga	Rwanda	PWN
19	WOP SEOH	Senegal	PWN
20	WOP HOMA WASCO	Kenya	Dunea
21	WOP Nairobi	Kenya	Waternet
22	WOP Laos	Laos	Waternet
23	WOP Mali	Mali	Waternet
24	WOP Morogoro	Tanzania	Waternet
25	WOP Sragen	Indonesia	Oasen

Source: Personal communication, VEI, January 2019.

Note: VEI's partnership in Indonesia (WOP Semarang) was still on hold as of January 2019.

The inception phase of WaterWorX (2017-2021) has a budget of EUR 55 million. EUR 30 million (55 percent) of this budget is granted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The rest of the funding is to be contributed by the Dutch water companies (35 percent) and their partner utilities (10 percent) in a co-financing arrangement.¹⁹ In return for the WaterWorX funding, the water companies are expected to submit periodic progress reports to the Ministry. When I asked VEI's CEO how much pressure there was to deliver results, he replied that the pressure was high due to public accountability and political commitments:

Well, that is a lot [of pressure], you could say. Of course, in every program, also for example WaterWorX, you need to start with a theory of change and means of verification and logical frameworks.... [For WaterWorX] every two years, there is a mid-term review, so there are a lot of checks and balances there. Especially for them [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] it's important, because for WaterWorX, there was an engagement from the Minister to say, 'We need to make an impact on the Sustainable Development Goals.' So they really are monitoring and also pressuring us to make sure that that is happening. So there is definitely a push. It has also to do with the civil servants. They need to of course be accountable to the parliament. And most of the time, that's only based on numbers. (interview, VEI CEO, August 2019)

The first mid-term review for WaterWorX was carried out between April 2019 and January 2020 by IRC Consult, a WASH consulting firm based in the Netherlands. Consultants conducted document reviews and interviews to assess the WaterWorX WOPs along four criteria: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability. The final evaluation report is expected to be released later in 2020 (interview, consultant WaterWorX mid-term review, February 2020).

4.3.5. Aid, Trade, and Investment

As the 2015 water and sanitation pledge and the subsequent launch of WaterWorX suggest, contributing to sustainable development is an important motivation of the Dutch government and the Dutch water companies implementing the WaterWorX partnerships. Development is only one side of the coin, however. Reflecting the “retro-liberal” turn in international development (see Section 4.1.1 above), the Netherlands adopted a new development policy in 2013. Known as “aid and trade,” this policy is spelled out in the document *A World to Gain: A New Agenda for Aid, Trade and Investment* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, 2013). In essence, the policy foresees reductions in aid spending while envisioning a stronger role for “reciprocity” and the Dutch business community in international

¹⁹ The contributions from the partner utilities can be in-kind (e.g., staff hours, equipment, meeting facilities, vehicles for local transportation). Co-financing is seen as crucial by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is believed to lead to higher levels of buy-in and commitment from the partners, as they will have their own resources at stake.

development. This applies especially to water as one of the policy’s four “priority areas” (ibid., 54).²⁰ The water sector is also among the so-called “top-sectors” of the Netherlands, which the government has designated as those “economic sectors in which Dutch companies and research institutes excel and are considered to be globally competitive” (Savelli et al., 2019, 1129; see also Büscher, 2019a).²¹

VEI is an organizational hybrid in the sense that it is publicly owned but legally private, allowing it to play the public or private card, depending on the situation. As Savelli et al. (2019) find, VEI wears, quite skillfully, “different hats” – sometimes public, sometimes private – in order to tap into various funding streams and comply with funders’ respective conditions (ibid., 1138). Thanks to its private facet and its efforts to cultivate a “professional” and “business-like” image (ibid., 1137), VEI is well-positioned “to respond effectively to the aid and trade logic” (ibid., 1138). WaterWorX, for instance, is officially declared a PPP, with VEI acting as the main (private) contractor. VEI takes a pragmatic – or “chameleonic” (Smith, 1990, 192) – approach to its organizational identity: “We are a bit public, we are a bit private, so if it’s convenient, we can be public or private. So in this case, for the aid and trade agenda, it was very good to be private” (interview, VEI CEO, August 2019).

In exchange for the government’s financial support, VEI is expected to play an active role in the promotion – or “imagineering” (Büscher, 2019b) – of the Dutch water sector abroad, “to help [the sector] build and maintain a competitive edge in the world market for water-related products and services” (ibid., 827). WOPs are one way to “convince other nations and regions that their water development challenges ... can best be tackled using Dutch knowledge, products and services” (ibid., 828).²² Noting that the government seeks to promote the use of knowledge from the whole Dutch water sector, both public and private, one RPM explained that “part of the WaterWorX program is also, we need to support Dutch development, private development, if we can. This is part of the partnerships” (interview, VEI RPM in Africa, March 2019). For VEI, reconciling its own objectives with the interests and priorities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Dutch business community can be a balancing act:

²⁰ The other “priority areas” are women’s rights and SRHR (sexual and reproductive health and rights), food security, and security and the rule of law (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, 2013, 54).

²¹ Apart from drinking water supply, the Dutch are renowned for their expertise in flood protection and delta planning. Interests related to “aid and trade” have affected these sub-sectors as well, as indicated by research on Dutch involvement in Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Vietnam (Colven, 2017, 2020; Goh, 2015; Hasan et al., 2019, 2020). My findings resonate with this research and its insights into the “export” of Dutch water expertise.

²² The government’s expectation apparently also extends to other sectors such as energy. An investigative article by van Beek et al. (2019) reports that VEI and its mentee utility FIPAG in Mozambique were invited to showcase their WOP in order to help Royal Dutch Shell, a major oil and gas company, win a contract in the country. According to an email from the Dutch embassy in Maputo quoted in the article, the idea was “to utilise [the Dutch water sector’s reputation] for the pitch NL [the Netherlands] will make to the gas sector” in Mozambique.

By VEI, we see that we promote the Dutch water sector as well, and that's a little bit the interest that the Ministry has and some of our business partners have, to position themselves in certain countries, which I think is quite legitimate. We try to balance that by not being too biased about certain providers and avoid to say, 'If we work with you, you always have to take your stuff from that certain provider.' But at least we sometimes try to showcase some of the innovations that are taking place in the Dutch water sector. (interview, VEI regional manager A, June 2018)

when we are partnering with one of the mentee utilities, we should be neutral, we should be objective, we should not be like with a hidden agenda, 'Because we are working with you, we also want to sell some Dutch products.' That sort of destroys almost our partnership relationship. So, I would say, it [branding the Dutch water sector] is a little bit there, but, let's say, at the very implicit level. (lecture, VEI CEO, June 2018)

The main goal is Sustainable Development Goal 6, but we are Dutch.... we can do the aid, and have the partnerships and the trust of the local water companies. But sometimes, [they] need to have a broader study done by an engineering company, or they need some new pumps, for example. Then we are not going to push them, but what we can do is introduce the [Dutch] companies we know. (interview, former Brabant Water international projects manager, August 2019)

Asked whether there are any linkages between international trade and WOPs, one WASH expert with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained that WOPs may occasionally entail business opportunities for Dutch private firms. However, according to the expert, such private contracts represent more of a “spin-off” of the partnerships, rather than their primary purpose:

in the wake of Water Operator Partnerships, you also sometimes see work unfolding for consulting firms, technical consulting firms, for example. And that's where, in some instances – I'm not saying every instance, because we don't prescribe anything – but in some instances, there is work granted to Dutch consulting firms to do technical specifications for network extensions and things like that. So in that sense, when it comes to a foreign trade perspective, it does have some kind of a spin-off. It's not the main objective [sustainable development], but it is providing some kind of a spin-off for the utilities themselves [becoming interesting employers] and also for some other water- and sanitation-related businesses in the Netherlands. (interview, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs senior policy officer WASH, September 2018)

Another component of “aid and trade” relates to finance and investment. The first phase of WaterWorX is intended to build up the financial viability, or “bankability,” of certain partner utilities to a point where they become eligible for loans by IFIs, and eventually attractive to private investors on the commercial market. In other words, WOPs are promoted as a mechanism to help “[pave] the road for transnational investment opportunities” (Wright-Contreras et al., 2020, 21). WOPs can be used to develop “solid business cases,” so that “multilateral and bilateral financiers will be attracted to invest in hardware and

corresponding technical assistance of water operators” (VEI, 2018a, 8). VEI envisions that “WaterWorX will mobilize up to USD 500 million in investments from the private sector for infrastructure expansion, rehabilitation, and improvements in the sector” (VEI regional manager, quoted in Wright-Contreras et al., 2020, 3).

During a session at the 2019 World Water Week in Stockholm, the same WASH expert quoted above explained how WOPs might help close the much-invoked “financing gap” in the water sector:

there is a financing gap ... to reach SDG 6.²³ And public resources are very scarce. So efficient use of resources is becoming more and more important. I think Water Operator Partnerships are a great example where efficient use of resources can be achieved, by reducing non-revenue water or improving energy efficiency.... By building that up in these utilities, you also create more financial viability and open up opportunities to access other types of financing, rather than just grants or public financing. (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs senior policy officer WASH, August 2019)

The overall picture that emerges from my interviews is that VEI is under some pressure to leverage its WOP-based reputation and networks to help private businesses and investors gain a foothold in local markets of partner countries. To stimulate the Dutch economy, VEI managers may, from time to time, share contacts or information about upcoming tenders with water technology companies and consulting firms back home (e.g., Arcadis, Royal HaskoningDHV, Witteveen+Bos). They also increase the international visibility of the Dutch water sector through their in-country presence and interaction with partners at different political levels.

At the same time, interviewees from VEI were of two minds about “aid and trade,” not least because excessive soliciting or “tying” attempts might compromise their working relationships with utility partners. In order to “keep the [WOP] brand clean” and protect relationships, some RPMs insist on drawing a line in the partnerships they are managing:

I discussed with the firms, ‘I’m not going to sell your products, because that undermines my credibility in a WOP.’... I always indicated [to the Dutch embassy], ‘I’m happy to introduce them [private firms], but they have to do the work. They have to do the sales. They have to discuss why they would be interesting for the partners.’ I emphasized, ‘I’m happy to introduce them, and if the utility will ask me if they are any good or not, I’ll tell them honestly. If I think they are not any good, I’m going to tell the utility since I’m there in the interest of the utility.’ (interview, former VEI RPM in Asia, April 2019)

²³ Mainstream sources put the funding shortfall in the water sector at USD 1.7 trillion (OECD, 2018a, 5). For a critical perspective, see Bayliss (2014).

The “aid and trade” agenda has thus met with some resistance and appears to be rather loosely implemented in practice. Formally, however, VEI has accepted the bargain in return for more partnerships and long-term government funding.

4.4. National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC)

Created in 1972, NWSC is a water and sewerage corporation that the government of Uganda owns. In the beginning, the corporation was only responsible for water and sewerage services in three cities: Kampala, Entebbe, and Jinja. Over the years, and especially since 2013/14, its operational jurisdiction has expanded rapidly. In 2016/17, the corporation, whose head office is in Kampala, employed a staff of over 3,000 and was active in 218 cities and towns all over Uganda (Tables 4.5 and 4.6).²⁴

Table 4.5. NWSC: Select Characteristics (2016/17)

	Employees	Network length (km)	Connections	Water production (million m ³)	Turnover (billion UGX)
NWSC	3,131	12,094	524,657	121	321

Source: NWSC Annual Report FY 2016/17, retrieved from <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1WkpZvOCgCsU7Pf0QERDABfwloyfmTJf7>.

Note: UGX = Ugandan Shilling.

In the water policy world, NWSC has won acclaim thanks to the famous “turnaround” that it performed between 1998 and 2008. In the 1990s, water and sewerage infrastructure was in a satisfactory state, but NWSC was a poorly performing organization in acute financial difficulty. In 1998, the corporation’s board of directors put a new managing director in charge of NWSC. To dispel the threat of privatization and put the corporation back on its feet, the new managing director William Muhairwe²⁵ implemented a series of organizational change management programs and performance contracts aimed at full

²⁴ A map of the cities and towns served by NWSC is available at https://bryanmyster.carto.com/viz/10bd0a7e-9ab8-11e6-a758-0ef7f98ade21/public_map.

²⁵ Muhairwe joined the water sector as an “outsider” in 1998, having been “handpicked to turn the NWSC around from more than 25 years of inefficiency” (Gutierrez and Musaaazi, 2003, 9). Muhairwe lived in Germany from 1979 to 1989. He studied business administration at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, where he completed his Ph.D. in 1987. He returned to Uganda in 1989 and worked in the steel industry and for the Uganda Investment Authority before his recruitment to NWSC (Muhairwe, 2014).

commercialization, in line with New Public Management (NPM) principles (Kitonsa and Schwartz, 2012; Schwartz, 2008).²⁶ In the ten years from 1998 to 2008, these programs and initiatives – some of which had catchy names such as “100 days,” “stretch-out,” “one-minute management,” and “checkers” – arguably had a considerable impact on NWSC’s corporate culture and performance levels. According to data from NWSC’s annual reports (Table 4.6), collection efficiency increased from 60 to 99 percent (meaning that 99 percent of the amount billed was actually collected); water coverage expanded from 48 to 73 percent; and staff productivity (measured in number of staff per 1,000 connections) changed from 36.4 to 7. It is difficult to verify the accuracy of these impressive changes without independent data, but NWSC promoted the Ugandan “success story” in several publications, written by Muhairwe himself or by his successor, Silver Mugisha (e.g., Mugisha and Berg, 2007, 2008; Mugisha et al., 2007; Muhairwe, 2009).²⁷

²⁶ Kitonsa and Schwartz (2012, 181) define NPM as “a market-oriented and output-based management model with an increased emphasis on user-orientation, most-commonly by ‘business’ style measures.” Key principles of NPM include cost recovery, autonomy, performance, and competition.

²⁷ Mugisha was among “those who were deeply involved in the change management programmes” under Muhairwe (Muhairwe, 2009, 353). Since taking over as managing director in 2013, Mugisha has tried to carry the reform momentum forward into the corporation’s service expansion phase. Under Mugisha, the number of towns served has increased more than threefold, from 66 to 218 (see Table 4.6). Some of the newly added towns are small and achieving commercial viability there remains a challenge (Tutusaus, 2019, 75-98; Tutusaus and Schwartz, 2020). Muhairwe had to retire from NWSC in 2011 following a leveling off of NWSC’s performance and public debates over his salary level and private wealth (Schiffler, 155, 157). After his departure, Muhairwe founded 2ML Consulting, a consulting firm specializing in organizational leadership and reform.

Table 4.6. NWSC: Select Key Performance Indicators

	1998	2003/04	2008/09	2013/14	2016/17
Turnover (billion UGX)	21	42.6	100	184	321
Number of towns served	12	19	23	66	218
Total water connections	50,826	100,475	225,932	366,330	524,657
New water connections	3,317	14,045	23,305	28,068	40,712
Water coverage (%)	48	65	73	77	78
Sewerage coverage (%)	n/a	8	6.4	6.4	6.4
Non-revenue water (%)	65.2	37.6	35.8	33.7	30.9
Metered accounts (%)	65	97	99	99.5	99.9
Collection efficiency (%)	60	101	99	96	93
Staff productivity	36.4	10	7	6	6

Source: Mugisha and Berg (2017, 174: Table 1); NWSC Annual Reports FY 2003/04, 2008/09, 2013/14, and 2016/17, retrieved from <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1WkpZvOCgCsU7Pf0QERDABfwloyfmTJf7>.

Note: UGX = Ugandan Shilling.

Part of NWSC’s organizational reform philosophy was “a ‘we can do it ourselves’ approach” (Mugisha and Berg, 2007, 25). With the right institutional environment and the right leadership team in place, public utilities can reach high performance levels by virtue of their own internal resources, without take-over by private companies or tutelage by foreign consultants: “International operators do not have a monopoly on approaches to improving performance. From NWSC’s experience, excellent performance can be ‘home-grown’” (ibid., 21). As Muhairwe (2009, 158) puts it in his book, *Making Public Enterprises Work*, “significant performance improvement in public utilities is feasible without recourse to ‘hiring people from Mars’. What matters most is the right management strategy to achieve wonders with locally available human resources.” According to Schiffler (2015, 145, 147), Muhairwe’s goal was “to show that NWSC could improve its performance without private sector participation, or in other words, that there was a viable public sector alternative to privatization.” In Kampala, certain operational activities were contracted out (via management contracts) to German and French firms between 1997 and 2004, but private-sector participation was successfully averted in the remaining cities and towns.

4.4.1. External Demand

NWSC's internal transformation soon began attracting interest from development partners and other public enterprises. The corporation acquired a reputation as "a well-performing and leading water utility in Africa" (Mvulirwenande et al., 2016, 1-2) and was held up "as a promising example for other public water utilities to follow" (Schwartz, 2008, 56). Domestically, the corporation "began to be seen as the best organization to manage rehabilitated water systems" (Mbuvi and Schwartz, 2013, 381). After a few years, the reform efforts were also recognized internationally:

the NWSC was gaining an international reputation for having drastically improved performance of the utility. At various International Fora (such as the World Bank Waterweek in 2003) the NWSC was presented as an example of a well-performing public utility. In short, the impressive performance improvements of the NWSC became the talk of the international water services community. (Kitonsa and Schwartz, 2012, 185)

As a result, there was a growing demand for NWSC's expertise:

Our success has been a good example which other organisations have been eager to learn. Indeed, over time, the NWSC's experiences and successes in service delivery have attracted the attention of many people and organisations in the country. They are keen to learn how successful interventions can succeed in turning an ailing government parastatal into a thriving, profit-making organisation. We have received invitations from a number of companies and government departments to make presentations about our change management programmes. They have been interested in learning about the critical success factors, management style and approaches to our change management programmes. Consequently, our staff have conducted induction courses and seminars for a number of company employees. (Muhairwe, 2009, 323)

In the early years of the reform process, NWSC staff received visitors and shared experiences as a "courtesy," but in 2005, when the requests were becoming too many, a commercial consultancy department, called External Services, was set up. Since its founding, NWSC External Services has been involved in numerous consultancy assignments with public companies to help them commercialize their services and enhance their performance, even beyond water and sanitation. In the electricity sector, for example, partnerships have been formed with the Uganda Electricity Distribution Company and TANESCO, the electricity company of Tanzania. In the water sector itself, NWSC has carried out consultancies in various African countries. In November 2005, Muhairwe could already look back on a number of concluded or ongoing assignments:

We installed a billing system for Nairobi City Council and trained their workers in its use. In Dar es Salaam, we are involved in a rescue programme for the water utility there,²⁸ while in Zambia, we are helping out at the Nkana Water & Sewerage Corporation in its operations in the copper belt. (Muhairwe, quoted in *New Vision*, 2005)

In addition to the activities in Kenya, Tanzania, and Zambia, NWSC was supposed to assist in the Aqua Vitens Rand Limited (AVRL) management contract in Ghana, mentioned in Section 4.3.1 above. But this assignment “to provide technical experts and short-term consultants” faltered, arguably due to “opposition to foreign involvement (especially Ugandan involvement) that prevails in certain segments of the Ghanaian population” (Yeboah, 2006, 61).

According to one version of the story, a news article (wrongly) proclaimed that NWSC would not just play an assisting role but would be part of the AVRL consortium to manage Ghana’s water company (see *GhanaWeb*, 2005). This news triggered a public outcry in Ghana. The tone of the backlash is reflected in some of the comments the article received online (see also Yeboah, 2006, 61):

Yesterday I heard it was the Nigerians who were going to manage Ghana water. Now it is the Ugandans. Which is which? Don’t insult Ghanaians by telling us a backwater hellhole of a Country like Uganda can send people to run our water for us. Whoever dreamed up this idea should be sacked. Find competent Ghanaians and pay them well to run the water system in Ghana. We have enough competent people to do the job well. (*GhanaWeb*, comment posted on December 1, 2005)

Oh Ghana! When I read such news, it really saddens me. Are we so low that we [import] managers from Uganda? So what are our universities there for? Can’t they produce just enough professionals to run our companies? (*GhanaWeb*, comment posted on December 1, 2005)

It is such a shame that Ghana and its NPP [New Patriotic Party] are going for a country like Uganda which find[s] it difficult to feed its citizens to come and run Ghana Water Company. (*GhanaWeb*, comment posted on December 1, 2005)

How can Ugandans be our managers, unless somebody is getting a kickback from this contract. Ghanaians are the best in Africa. I have never hidden this fact. Whenever I meet my African friends, I let them know that without Ghana, there will be no Africa.... My African friends always tell me that we Ghanaians are relying on past glories. It may be true, but I cannot understand why Ugandans could do a better job than Ghanaians. I

²⁸ The rescue program was developed for DAWASCO, the re-municipalized water utility of Dar es Salaam, after the early termination of a lease contract in 2005 (see Chapter 1).

have been away from home for about 22 years, but I still think Ghana is the best place in Africa. Our arch rivals [the] Nigerians admit that. (*GhanaWeb*, comment posted on December 10, 2005)

To limit the damage done, NWSC was subsequently excluded from AVRL activities in Ghana.²⁹ This incident provokes the question of whether certain regional rivalries, or certain sentiments of “Afrophobia,” exist within Africa that may stand in the way of greater intra-African cooperation.³⁰

The exclusion from the Ghana contract in 2005 did not prevent NWSC from expanding its activities elsewhere on the continent. As Muhairwe (2009, 261) asserts, thanks to the self-reliant approach to capacity building adopted by NWSC’s leadership, “NWSC staff have progressively acquired excellent professional expertise to the extent that they have been hired as consultants to render service to water utilities in neighbouring countries.” Some of the consultancies were carried out in response to donor requests, while others resulted from direct demand by companies seeking to follow NWSC’s path. Over the years, External Services has been turned into one of the corporation’s most important “cash cows,” generating additional revenue that can be invested back into infrastructure, operations, and training. One notable example is NWSC’s conference and training center in Kampala, called the NWSC International Resource Centre, whose construction was financed with External Services money (interview, former NWSC managing director, October 2018).

While External Services has become a commercial success for NWSC, some scholars and activists have been critical of the corporation’s consulting activities. Bayliss and Adam (2012, 343), for instance, suggest that cases like NWSC involve “an increasing blurring of the divide between public and private.” NWSC is publicly owned but is “operating in a similar vein to the private sector.” External Services “operates as a consultancy and bids for tenders in the same way as private companies.” In the lessons shared with other utilities, there is a heavy focus on financial performance but apparently “no reference to how to reach those most in need or how to identify when a household cannot pay or how to finance extensions to poor areas.” Knowledge sharing within the public domain is important, but

where a state provider is operating as a private company, financing their domestic operations with services to other African utilities, there is a lack of solidarity and dilution of the public sector ethos. Even when the ‘consultancies’ are financed by donors, these costs have some opportunity value in that these are resources that could have been spent on some other component of donor support. (ibid., 343)

²⁹ NWSC could no longer participate in the management contract but later entered into a WOP with the water company in Ghana. The WOP took place under the 2013-2015 program sponsored by OFID, discussed in Chapter 2 (see also Shang-Quartey, 2014).

³⁰ I return to this question in Chapter 6.

4.4.2. Not-For-Profit, Not-For-Loss

Such concerns notwithstanding, NWSC was approached by GWOPA with an invitation to mentor other utilities in the global South. At the time of the request, the corporation already had a flourishing in-house consultancy department – External Services – that charged other utilities for the services provided. This created a problem for NWSC, out of which grew the idea of “not-for-profit, not-for-loss.” In an interview with me, Muhairwe recalled his response to GWOPA’s request:

The thing was, are we going to do it free-of-charge? Because for us, we were charging. If you called us, you’d have to pay. When they started introducing those operator partnerships, they wanted to do it on a ‘friendly’ basis. And I remember we had a very big argument, where we said, ‘OK fine, we will do this at no profit, but at the same time, at no loss.’ (interview, former NWSC managing director, October 2018)

NWSC came up with the “not-for-profit, not-for-loss” concept to ensure that WOPs would not become a drain on the corporation’s resources. Even if no profits could be made, staff would at least be compensated for the time and effort dedicated to the partnerships, by having travel costs and allowances covered. One NWSC director made it clear that “[u]tilities are definitely not charity organizations.... Somewhere, somehow, someone is funding it. It can’t be for free” (interview, NWSC director, March 2019). NWSC and GWOPA eventually agreed on a basic fee structure that fell below the market rates normally charged by External Services. As most mentees can only contribute to WOPs in-kind, it is often donors and development partners who pay the direct expenses.

In accordance with GWOPA’s not-for-profit principle, NWSC does not reap any immediate monetary benefits from WOPs. This does not mean, however, that the corporation is always just breaking even and not getting anything in return for its mentoring services. Sometimes, the returns are more indirect. For instance, when partners from a mentee utility come to Kampala for a “benchmarking” visit, NWSC staff makes a point of presenting a range of programs and solutions, beyond the focus area of the respective WOP. This may pave the way for future consultancy assignments:

We tell them a bit about the other things that we do, some other solutions that we have developed, some other programs that we have implemented. And through that process, they are able to pick on those applicable solutions and they can come back to us. After the WOP, some utilities come back to us and they hire us to help them with their challenges that might not have been tackled, or not completely tackled, in the WOP. (interview, NWSC manager, April 2019)

The partnerships, and the regional and international standing NWSC has gained through its mentoring of others, can also be worthwhile when it comes to raising donor money for the corporation:

Our outreach has helped us to build networks that also help us when we are looking for funding for our own organization, because we have gained that confidence from the development partners in the role that we are playing in assisting other utilities. So that gives a certain level of confidence and sometimes attracts more money back into our own company. (interview, NWSC director, March 2019)

4.4.3. Innovation

In partnerships with other utilities, NWSC staff can also develop skills for the facilitation of performance improvement programs and the sharing of training materials. Experienced facilitators can spread their skills through “training-of-trainers” sessions and can become “change champions” in their own right, feeding best practices and lessons learned back into the corporation. In fact, some of the more recent innovations at NWSC are directly inspired by ideas discovered during international partnerships: “as we are helping [other] utilities, we are able to also pick some lessons, applicable lessons, so that we can go back home and improve” (interview, NWSC manager, April 2019). One example is the concept of *water barazas*, adopted from Tanzania.³¹ *Water barazas* are local area meetings that are now implemented by NWSC to strengthen stakeholder engagement and public accountability.

4.4.4. Staff Retention

In contrast to the Dutch water companies, where staff recruitment is a prime concern, the main HR-related challenge for NWSC consists in *retaining* qualified personnel (see also Martins de Andrade, 2010, 70). As part of the internal reform process 1998-2008, many employees were given the opportunity to pursue graduate studies for further qualification:

NWSC top leaders encouraged and supported staff development activities during the change programmes. Apart from usual in-house trainings, many staff enrolled in universities to earn an advanced degree (MSc or PhD)... As a result, NWSC is one of a few water utilities in Sub-Saharan Africa employing a large number of staff with advanced degrees. (Mvulirwenande et al., 2016, 7)

This focus on training and qualification has reportedly paid off for the corporation:

At NWSC, we have done our best to train our staff up to the PhD level. We have encouraged and sponsored them to attend local and international seminars, workshops and conferences. We have established a training centre in Kampala³² to provide continuous training and refresher courses to update and upgrade our staff through skills development. As a result, we have, over the years, developed a highly trained, motivated and

³¹ *Baraza* is the Swahili word for “council.”

³² The NWSC International Resource Centre, mentioned above.

committed professional team comparable to their best peers around the world, which is already offering expert external services to sister water utilities in Africa and elsewhere in the world. (Muhairwe, 2009, 388)

On the other hand, NWSC management soon realized that action was needed to prevent highly qualified staff from looking for better opportunities elsewhere. Besides pay raises and promotions, External Services and WOPs have been utilized as key retention incentives. The partnerships reward the corporation's best and brightest staff with international travel and opportunities to develop creative solutions. They help ensure that university graduates are "not just bogged down with the day-to-day routine of a utility" but also "have other challenges to think about" (interview, NWSC director, March 2019). To some extent, this strategy has proven effective. While the corporation has lost some staff to other sectors (e.g., electricity, transportation) and private consulting, many trained employees with master's and Ph.D. degrees have chosen to stay at NWSC.

4.5. Conclusion

This chapter has examined the reasons why mentor operators share their knowledge and expertise with other utilities through WOPs. Informed by larger debates over the roles of solidarity and self-interest in international development, the Dutch and Ugandan cases suggest that the polarized discussion surrounding WOPs is too simplistic and fails to capture the manifold motivations for peer mentoring in the water sector. In the cases of VEI and NWSC, motivations originate in internal organizational needs and achievements as well as in external demands and conditions, and range from staff development, recruitment, and retention to the promotion of sustainable development and the furthering of opportunities for domestic businesses and investors. While solidarity – or a certain "public service ethos" – may be a motivation of individual staff members going abroad (an area for future research), it is not a predominant motivating factor at the organizational level of either VEI or NWSC. Instead, the two cases support the view that WOPs "often serve secondary purposes, such as making the company attractive for new staff, improving the corporate image of the utility and so on. Achieving these benefits, which normally would cost money, is now essentially subsidized" (Rusca and Schwartz, 2013, 118: Note 4).

Ever since WOPs were first proposed in 2006, much activist energy has been spent on the role of private operators and their potential to corrupt the public orientation of WOPs or misuse the partnerships for profit-oriented ends. The motivations and mentoring activities of public operators have received much less attention. WOPs may be attractive for private companies as a stepping stone towards PPPs, but such commercial ventures are, as previously discussed, now held in check by a (more or less effective) control

mechanism at the global level (see Chapter 3). What has rarely been part of global discussions so far are interests related to trade, investment, and corporatization.

Trade: Facilitating networking and sharing of information, WOPs can be used to help ancillary firms (e.g., consulting, engineering, technology) make inroads into new markets, thereby enlarging these firms' opportunities for international export and trade. The trade-facilitating function of WOPs is actively promoted and encouraged by the Dutch government as part of the WaterWorX program but has not been subject to critical scrutiny so far.

Investment: Much of the critique surrounding WOPs remains fixated on privatization, while the emerging links between WOPs and investment financing are largely overlooked.³³ In WaterWorX, and in international water policy circles more broadly, WOPs are increasingly framed as a vehicle to prepare water utilities for infrastructure finance, including from private sources. Increased investment in the water sector is undoubtedly needed if the world is to achieve SDG 6 by 2030. Yet the emerging alignment of WOPs with the needs of private capital is problematic if this were to steer partnerships away from progressive themes such as affordability and inclusion. WOPs themselves need to be funded in the first place, and with external funding comes the risk that donor interests take priority over partnership concerns.

Corporatization: The fact that many mentors remain publicly owned – and thus conform to the original pro-public vision for WOPs – should not shield these organizations from critical examination. Neither should solidarity-infused rhetoric distract from the realities of South-South cooperation and service provision in the global South. Corporatization – or the process of “[making] the state more like the private sector” (Bayliss, 2011, 74) – “is arguably the single most important trend in ‘public’ service delivery today” (McDonald and Ruiters, 2012b, 497). NWSC is a prime example of this trend. As a service provider under public ownership, NWSC is committed to sharing lessons learned with colleagues and peers, but, at the same time, is using WOPs to promote its for-profit consultancy arm regionally and internationally. For NWSC, WOPs are not counter-hegemonic projects of South-South solidarity. Rather, the partnerships present opportunities for the corporation to cement its regional supremacy and international reputation. In WOPs with other operators in Africa, solidarity appears to play no greater role for NWSC than for VEI. If anything, solidarity is *less* relevant for NWSC, as there is no legislated funding mechanism for WOPs in Uganda (like there is in the Netherlands). Priding itself on a history of

³³ The only critical remark on financing that I have come across so far was made by David Boys during the eleventh GWOPA SC meeting in Madrid: “We must be careful that finance does not lead development, but that people lead. Let’s make municipal public utilities and staff the champions” (quoted in 11th SC meeting, outcome notes, February 2019).

“turnaround” corporatization, the issue of cost coverage looms large for NWSC, and there seems to be little room for “charity” in an organization that has made much progress but still has a long way to go in achieving universal coverage in its own jurisdiction.

How “public” are corporatized public utilities like NWSC when they go abroad (cf. Boag and McDonald, 2010; Furlong, 2016; McDonald, 2013, 2016b)? Are they advancing public values? Are they sharing progressive approaches to service provision? Or do they advise their colleagues to follow market-oriented or NPM-inspired approaches instead? How do the mentee partners – for whose benefit WOPs are supposedly done – navigate, accommodate, or contest the knowledge imparted and the interests pursued by their mentors? And what are the implications for capacity development and knowledge sharing that WOPs are intended to promote? Chapter 5 provides initial answers to these questions by following VEI and NWSC out of their headquarters and into the field, to one of their mentees in Southern Africa: the water utility serving Malawi’s capital Lilongwe.

CHAPTER 5

Water Operator Partnerships in Lilongwe, Malawi: A Mentee Perspective

This chapter starts with an overview of Lilongwe Water Board (LWB), a water operator in Malawi that has partnered as a mentee with both VEI and NWSC. LWB supplies water to Malawi’s capital city and surrounding areas. Apart from commercial centers, government offices, and wealthy enclaves, the water board is responsible for providing water to Lilongwe’s low-income areas. The conditions of water access and everyday life in these areas are briefly surveyed in this chapter. One of the major challenges facing LWB, and many other water utilities in Sub-Saharan Africa, is the issue of water losses. To reduce water lost to leakages, misappropriation, and other irregularities, the water board has formulated a strategy that it seeks to implement with the help of utility partners. LWB’s partnership with VEI started in 2009 under a service contract that later turned into a WOP. The most recent partnership with NWSC took place from 2017 to 2018. This chapter provides detailed assessments of both partnerships, with a focus on the perspectives and experiences of local staff.

5.1. Lilongwe’s Urban Waterscape

LWB is a water operator with the mandate to deliver “water supply services to the City of Lilongwe and surrounding areas” (LWB, 2018a; for an overview, see Table 5.1). Established in 1947 and reorganized in 1995, LWB is one of five water boards in Malawi.¹ It is a statutory corporation accountable to Malawi’s Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development and can be characterized as “a government owned water utility” that “operates on a commercial basis” (Banda, 2016, 20). LWB’s commercial orientation is also reflected in its vision statement, which emphasizes customer relations and financial viability: “To be a leading customer focused, financially viable water utility in Southern Africa” (LWB, 2015b, iii; see also Figure 5.1).²

¹ The creation of water boards in Malawi was stipulated by the Waterworks Act No. 17 of 1995. The law is available at <https://malawilii.org/mw/legislation/act/1995/17>.

² Commercial logics also pervade other water boards in Malawi such as Blantyre Water Board (BWB), which, according to Tchuwa (2018, 17), operates based on “a commercially-oriented water ethos.”

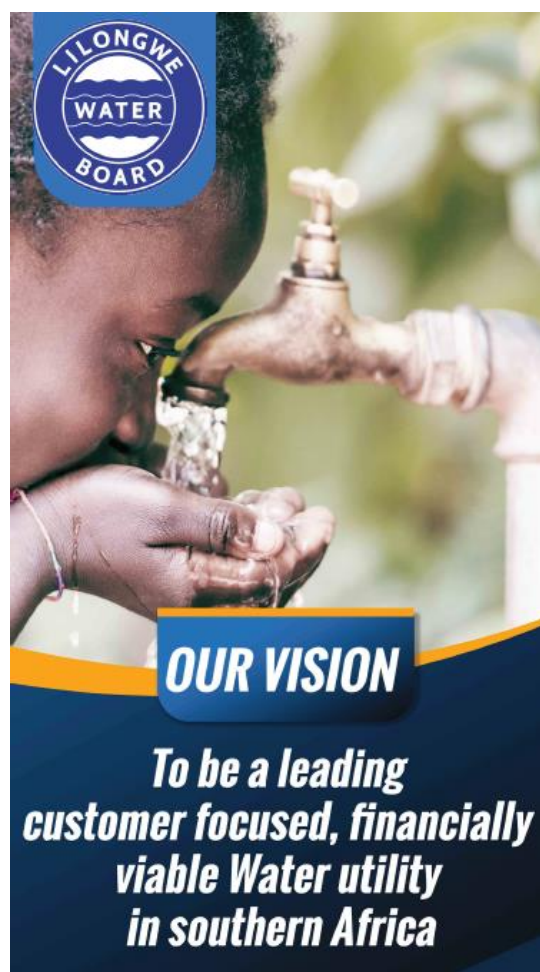
Table 5.1. LWB: Select Characteristics (2015/16)

	Employees	Network length (km)	Connections	Water production (million m³)	Turnover (MWK)
LWB	482	2,800	57,728	34	n/a

Source: Banda (2016, 34); LWB (2015b, ii, 8, 2016b, 3).

Note: MWK = Malawi Kwacha.

Figure 5.1. LWB Vision



Source: LWB (2018c, 6).

LWB draws its raw water from the Lilongwe River, which arises in a forest reserve southwest of the city. Along its course, the river is intercepted by two dams, Kamuzu I and Kamuzu II. The dams are named after Hastings Kamuzu Banda, the first president of independent Malawi, who ruled the country in a dictatorial fashion until 1994.³ Kamuzu I (Figure 5.2) was built in 1966, the same year Malawi became a republic and Banda assumed the presidency. Kamuzu II was built in 1989 and inaugurated by the *Ngwazi* on September 22, 1992 (Figure 5.3).⁴ A refurbishment of Kamuzu II was undertaken in 1999 to increase the dam's storage capacity (LWB, 2018a).

LWB staff oversees the dam reservoir (Figure 5.4) and releases water to Lilongwe. When the water reaches the city, it is abstracted and treated in two water treatment plants (Treatment Works I and II). The abstraction point and the treatment facilities are located on the head office compound in Area 3 (Figure 5.5).⁵ After treatment, the water is distributed across the water board's supply area to domestic, institutional, industrial, and commercial customers (LWB, 2018a). To make service delivery more manageable and customer-responsive, the supply area has been divided into three operational zones: Central Zone (CZ), Northern Zone (NZ), and Southern Zone (SZ), as shown in Figure 5.6.

³ According to Venter (1995, 155), "Malawi [under Banda] was not even a one-party state: it was a one-man state, a political despotism in which the state apparatus was answerable to only one man. The result was a climate of fear almost unparalleled anywhere in Africa, even in countries wracked by violence." Malawi transitioned to a multi-party system between 1992 and 1994 (Breytenbach and Peters-Berries, 2003; Brown, 2004; Ihonvbere, 1997; Kaunda, 1998; Posner, 1995; van Donge, 1995; Venter, 1995). Since the first multi-party elections in 1994, the country has seen relative political stability, although protests have occasionally erupted (Brooks and Loftus, 2016; Cammack, 2012; Wroe, 2012), most recently in the aftermath of the May 2019 general elections ("Malawi: Protests Turn Violent," 2019; *The Economist*, 2020). As one of the world's poorest countries, Malawi continues to face many development challenges (see Appendix V) and is strongly reliant on donor assistance (Resnick, 2013).

⁴ Banda, who was named president for life in 1971, was known as the *Ngwazi*, meaning "conqueror" (Ihonvbere, 1997, 225) or "savior" (Posner, 1995, 133). Massana (2000/2005, 70) translates the Chichewa word *ngwazi* as "big strong man" or "brave illustrious warrior, hero, lion." This title alludes to Banda's role in freeing Malawi from British colonial rule. Despite the cruelties committed under the Banda regime, signs of remembrance, like the commemorative plaque in Figure 5.3, continue to be displayed in Malawi. On the politics of public memory after Banda, see Chirambo (2008, 2010).

⁵ The city of Lilongwe has 59 administrative areas. Areas 1 to 47 date back to modernist urban planning in the 1960s and 1970s, when Lilongwe was modeled into Malawi's capital by the Banda regime and a team of white planners from apartheid South Africa (Myers, 2003, 342-347, 2011, 60). Areas 48 to 59 have been added more recently as the city grew beyond its original boundaries. The numbering of Lilongwe's areas does not follow a clear spatial logic, and only "very few of the original plan's 'Areas' have taken on a new name. People have grown accustomed to referring to their neighborhoods simply by number" (Myers, 2003, 347).

Figure 5.2. Kamuzu Dam I



Source: Photo by author, November 2018.

Figure 5.3. Kamuzu Dam II: Commemorative Plaque



Source: Photo by author, November 2018.

Note: The text on the plaque reads:

KAMUZU DAM II
OPENED BY
HIS EXCELLENCY THE LIFE PRESIDENT
OF
THE REPUBLIC OF MALAWI
NGWAZI DR. H. KAMUZU BANDA
ON
22 SEPTEMBER 1992

Figure 5.4. Kamuzu Reservoir



Source: Photo by author, November 2018.

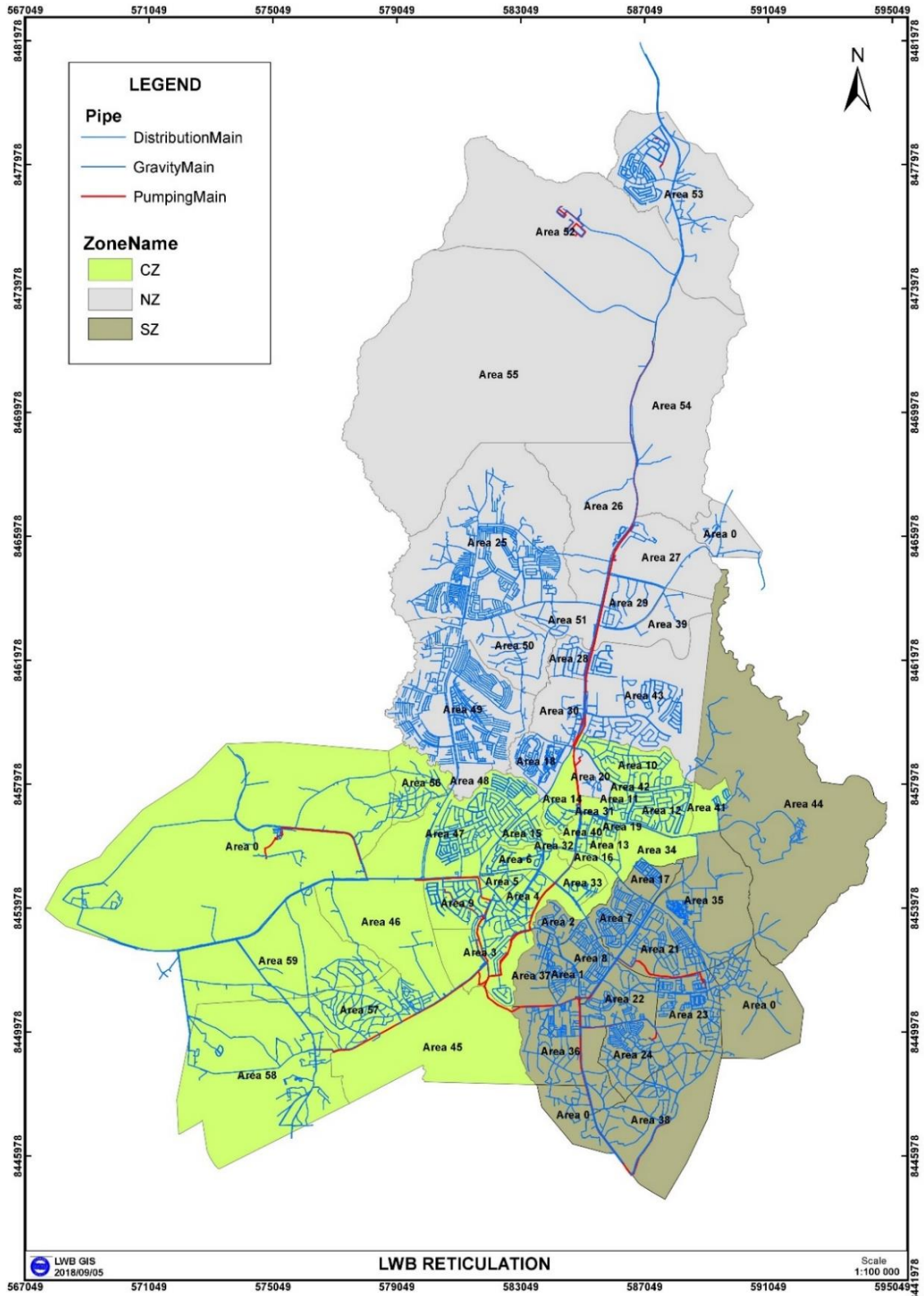
Figure 5.5. LWB Head Office, Area 3



Source: Photo by author, November 2018.

Note: *Madzi* means “water” in Chichewa.

Figure 5.6. LWB Supply Area



Source: LWB GIS department, September 2018.

The Central Zone is located on the western bank of Lilongwe River and includes the commercial Old Town and the City Centre, government offices, embassies, and well-off residential areas. According to Tiwale et al. (2018, 329), the Central Zone is “where ministers, government officials and expats reside.” The zone also includes informal settlements (Area 56) bordering a planned residential area (Area 47) as well as low-income areas on the western fringe of the city (e.g., Areas 46 and 57, known as Chinsapo). The Northern Zone comprises Kanengo industrial area (Area 29), where some of Malawi’s major tobacco companies are situated.⁶ In addition to Kanengo and a few up-market hotels in wealthy Area 43, the zone consists of medium- to high-density residential areas (Areas 18, 25, and 49) interspersed by informal settlements. It stretches through forests and cemeteries (Areas 54 and 55) up to the airport (Area 52) and the town of Lumbadzi (Area 53). The Southern Zone covers the eastern bank of Lilongwe River. Apart from two important government installations,⁷ it is primarily composed of densely populated residential areas and informal settlements that are home to many of the city’s poorest residents. In an interview, an LWB employee gave the following account of the Southern Zone:

The Southern Zone is quite different from the other two zones, because a big part of our customer base [there] is low-income, there are low-income areas. People say the poorest of the poor in Lilongwe live this side of town.... So as you’d expect, low-income areas, most of them are unplanned. So the areas that we have in the Southern Zone are unplanned. You can’t use a GPS to find a certain street in the Southern Zone. You won’t find it. It will take you somewhere else. So that poses a challenge. Now, in our reticulation, our pipe mains, we are not sure where our pipes are. Some people construct above our pipelines. Sometimes, you would want to extend [the network] to a certain area to supply them [the people there] with potable water, but the way the area is, you can’t even find an access road, just a footpath. (interview, LWB manager G, November 2018)

With its pockets of wealth and poverty, reflected in uneven network patterns and densities, Lilongwe closely resembles the “archipelago” structure that characterizes many cities in the global South (Bakker, 2003; Kooy and Bakker, 2008). In Lilongwe, “a networked water supply system exists but covers only a proportion of the city” (Bakker, 2003, 332). Like in other cities with a colonial past, the marked differences in wealth and living standards between the western and eastern banks of Lilongwe River have not developed organically but date from deliberate decisions taken in Malawi’s colonial period.⁸ As Kalipeni (1999, 77-78) writes,

In most colonial settings, physical space was invariably used to promote the separation of social space. In 1924 colonial Lilongwe was thus divided into sectors, one part for the natives on the eastern bank of the

⁶ Tobacco leaves are Malawi’s most important cash crop and vital for the country’s export earnings. Smith and Lee (2018, 187) describe Malawi as “one of the most tobacco-dependent countries in the world.”

⁷ The presidential residence (State House) is located in Area 44. Area 35 houses the Kamuzu military barracks.

⁸ Malawi (called Nyasaland before independence) was under British colonial rule from 1891 to 1964.

Lilongwe River and the other for the residences of the district commissioner and his fellow colonial officers and other Europeans on the western bank of the Lilongwe River ... Thus while the initial city was founded on the western bank of the river, all natives were ordered to move to the eastern bank in 1924. The Asians were allocated the southeastern portion of the city on the same side as the indigenous people. It should be noted that the area on the western bank of the river was on higher ground and hence was thought to have a smaller risk of malaria, cholera outbreaks, and other diseases, i.e. prime ground for European settlement. African workers in the colonial government such as police constables, court clerks and messengers were housed in less permanent houses made of mud and thatched with grass on the eastern bank of the Lilongwe River.... Thus right from the start Lilongwe was a differentiated city, with the European core on the western side of the river boundary marker and the African and Asian cores on the eastern side.

When Lilongwe was transformed into Malawi’s capital after independence,⁹ colonial legacies of segregation and disparity persisted. These legacies are still palpable today, including in the provision of water services. Lilongwe’s population was less than 100,000 in 1977; by 2018, it had grown to nearly one million (Table 5.2), making the city the largest urban center in the country ahead of Blantyre, Mzuzu, and Zomba. As of 2008, more than 70 percent of Lilongwe’s population was residing in informal settlements (UN-Habitat, 2011, 18).

Table 5.2. Population, Lilongwe City (1966-2018)

1966	1977	1987	1998	2008	2018
19,425	98,718	223,318	440,471	674,448	989,318

Source: Government of Malawi (2019, 14: Table 2.5); UN-Habitat (2011, 12: Table 1).

In 2018, LWB reported a water coverage rate of 83 percent (LWB, 2018a), suggesting that most of Lilongwe’s inhabitants were receiving water from the utility. Research has shown, however, that service levels differ dramatically according to geographical location, political power, and ability to pay. As a UN-Habitat report on Lilongwe remarks: “Basic urban services such as water and electricity are supplied on application basis, and those who cannot afford to pay for the services do not get them” (UN-Habitat, 2011, 9). While LWB ensures that “premium users” (Tiwale et al., 2018, 326) and “critical customers” (Alda-

⁹ Lilongwe became Malawi’s capital in 1975. The colonial capital was Zomba. For discussions of the capital relocation in Malawi, see Kalipeni (1999), Mlia (1975), Myers (2003, 342-352, 2011, 59-61), Potts (1985a, 1985b), and Vale (2008, 152).

Vidal et al., 2018, 114) in the Central Zone enjoy a reliable supply of piped water inside the home, poorer segments of the population, especially in the Southern Zone, receive smaller quantities of water and are serviced through yard connections or communal water selling points known as “kiosks.” According to data from Malawi’s 2018 census, over 35 percent of Lilongwe’s residents use community standpipes, including kiosks, as their main source of drinking water. Only about 15 percent have the privilege of an in-house connection (“piped into dwelling”) as their primary source (Table 5.3).

Table 5.3. Population by Main Source of Drinking Water, Lilongwe City (2018)

		Dry season (May-October)		Wet season (November-April)	
		<i>No. of people</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>No. of people</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Networked	Piped into dwelling	144,643	14.5	145,526	14.7
	Piped into yard/plot	291,140	29.2	295,179	29.9
	Community standpipe	351,178	35.3	354,727	35.9
	Total	786,961	79.0	795,432	80.5
Non-networked	Protected well	73,625	7.4	70,514	7.1
	Unprotected well	24,184	2.4	19,564	2.0
	Borehole	88,454	8.9	85,504	8.6
	Spring	2,969	0.3	2,647	0.3
	River/stream	2,718	0.3	2,854	0.3
	Pond/lake	98	0.0	94	0.0
	Dam	418	0.0	316	0.0
	Other	16,616	1.7	11,413	1.2
	Total	209,082	21.0	192,906	19.5
	Total	996,043	100.0	988,338	100.0

Source: Government of Malawi (2019, 226: Table I15, 230: Table I17).

5.2. Water Access and Everyday Life in Lilongwe’s Low-Income Areas

The first water kiosks were constructed in Malawi in the 1980s (Manda, 2009, 28-29). In 2018, 1,133 kiosks were in existence across LWB’s supply area, clustered in low-income, high-density neighborhoods such as Areas 56 and 57 (Central Zone) and Areas 50 and 53 (Northern Zone). In the Southern Zone, kiosks can be found in almost all of the areas (Figures 5.7, 5.8, and 5.9).

Figure 5.7. Water Kiosk in a Peri-Urban Area of Lilongwe, with Kiosk Attendant



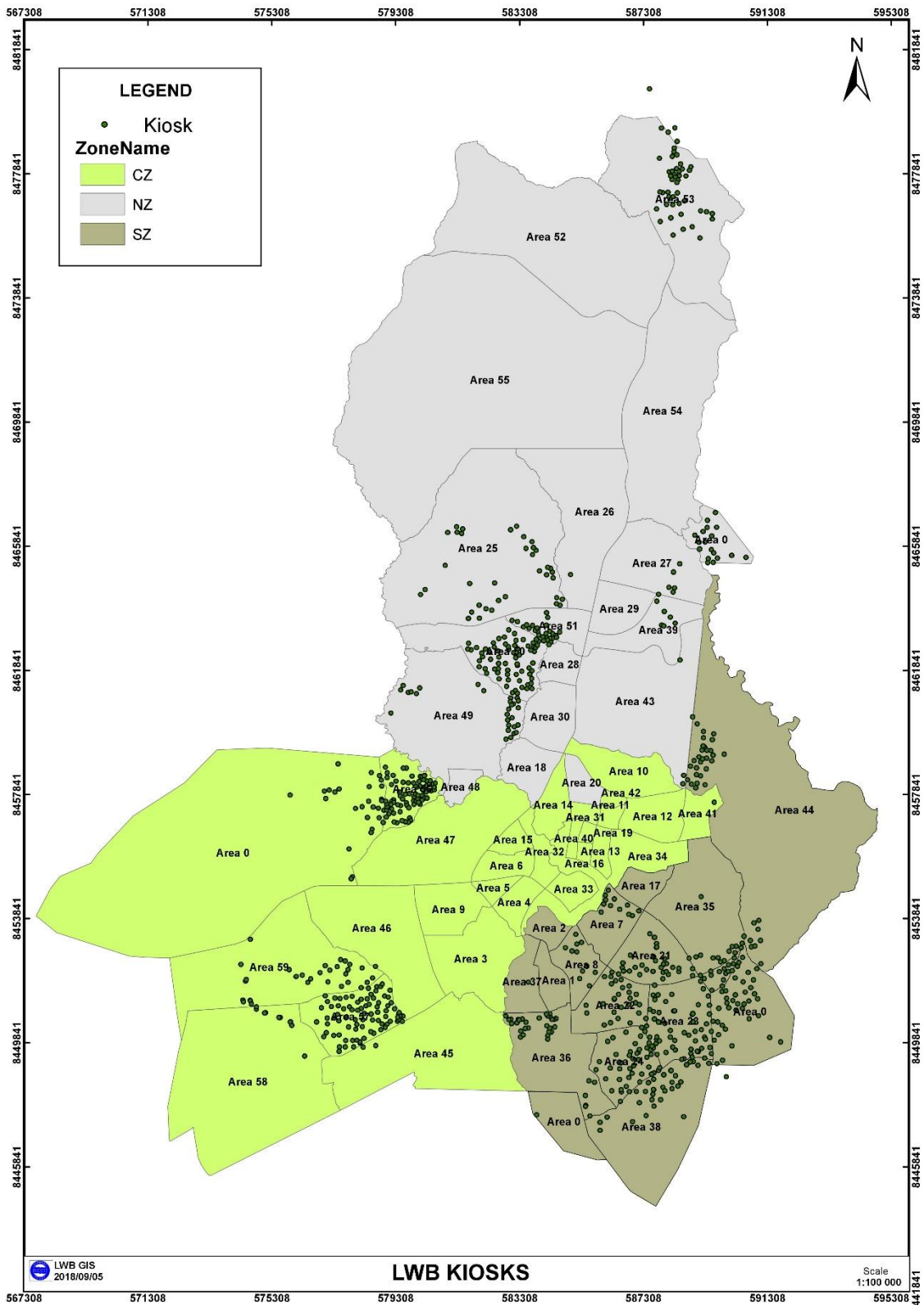
Source: Photo by author, November 2018.

Figure 5.8. Water Kiosk in a Peri-Urban Area of Lilongwe, Newly Constructed



Source: Photo by author, November 2018.

Figure 5.9. Spatial Distribution of Water Kiosks in Lilongwe



Source: LWB GIS department, September 2018.

The kiosks in Lilongwe are overseen by a Kiosk Management Unit (KMU). The KMU is part of LWB's finance department and tasked with improving interactions between the water board and low-income communities. The unit originates in a dispute over arrears in Area 56, which led LWB to threaten closure of 40 percent of the kiosks in the area in 2002 (LWB, 2005, 4).¹⁰ To resolve this dispute, two NGOs – WaterAid and the Centre for Community Organisation and Development (CCODE) – stepped in and managed to broker an agreement (Manda, 2009, 31). In the ensuing process of “collaborative experimentation” (Mitlin and Walnycki, 2020, 273), the KMU was created and Water User Associations (WUAs) were formed in various parts of the city.

WUAs are community-based organizations that buy water in bulk from LWB and then resell it at kiosks to consumers. The associations operate on the basis of service agreements with the water board. These agreements are renewed annually, depending on performance. According to a spreadsheet shared with me in November 2018, most of the water kiosks in Lilongwe (75 percent) are run by the WUAs. The remaining kiosks (25 percent) are under the auspices of the water board, the private sector, churches, and other community-based organizations. Funding for kiosk construction has been provided by donors such as the EIB, the World Bank, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), WaterAid, Plan International, the Dutch Water for Life Foundation, and the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF).

When the first WUAs were formed in Lilongwe in 2006,¹¹ the approach seemed promising in bringing about better kiosk management and improved services in low-income areas. Manda (2009, 62), for instance, suggested that the WUA model “represents progress towards management systems that ensure sustainable water supply and prompt payment of bills.”¹² What has now become apparent, however, is that the model, and the way it has been designed and implemented, comes with its own problems and challenges. From the outset, the WUAs “were designed with a heavy, hierarchical organisational structure” (Rusca and Schwartz, 2012, 694). This structure comprises a board of trustees, an executive committee, and a secretariat. The costs of maintaining this elaborate structure (e.g., honoraria and allowances for trustees and executives, kiosk attendant salaries, community donations, miscellaneous expenses) are habitually passed on to consumers at the kiosks, where water is sold at a rate far surpassing

¹⁰ The situation in Area 56 was apparently characteristic of the broader state of kiosk management at the time, which Adams and Zulu (2015, 116) describe as inefficient, opaque, corrupt, and highly politicized. According to Adams and Boateng (2018, 477), kiosk operations were “messy” and “historically fraught with mismanagement, embezzlement of funds, corruption and inefficiencies.”

¹¹ At present, there are seven WUAs in Lilongwe. Six were formed in July 2006 and a seventh association became active in July 2015 (Chikasema, 2009, 91; LWB, 2015a).

¹² For a review of the early achievements of WUAs in terms of water supply, financial management, and employment generation, see Adams and Boateng (2018), Adams and Zulu (2015), and Chikasema (2009).

LWB's subsidized bulk water charge.¹³ Rather than putting the needs of low-income consumers first, some WUAs seem to be mainly concerned with the perpetuation of their own privileges, which are reinforced by the de facto exclusiveness of WUA membership and the prerogatives afforded to local elites (Pihljak et al. 2019; Rusca and Schwartz, 2012, 694-695; Rusca et al., 2015).

Although the WUAs are supposed to be participatory and inclusive, female community members are often barred from higher-level positions of influence. If women manage to access the associations at all, they tend to be relegated to low-ranking occupations, such as kiosk inspectors or kiosk attendants (Adams et al., 2018; Chiweza et al., 2015). Having no other income-generating opportunities to support their families, many women are grateful for finding employment with the WUAs. Yet, being on the frontlines of water selling, kiosk attendants are often exposed to harassment and suspicion by kiosk users and the higher echelons of WUAs. For instance, when a WUA board of trustees decides on a rate increase, it is not the (predominantly male) board members but the (predominantly female) kiosk attendants who must "adjudicate water conflicts at the kiosks" and have to endure customer anger, including "verbal abuse and threats" (Adams et al., 2018, 137, 139).

Water shortages and intermittent supply occur frequently at the kiosks. Sometimes, water is only available in the evening or at night. In the words of one kiosk attendant, "we get water only when the rich people are asleep" (quoted in Rusca, Boakye-Ansah et al., 2017, 142). This exposes kiosk attendants and kiosk users to considerable risks. In Rusca's (2017) documentary, *Lilongwe Water Works?*, one kiosk attendant expresses her fears of selling water after dark:

I have to sell water at night. Same goes for the customers. We kiosk attendants risk meeting thieves. They know we have money and want to rob us.... Customers also get robbed. They run away and sometimes break their bucket. This is what happens during shortages.... Selling water at night is difficult. Sometimes women come to my house and ask me to sell them water. We go there together but then they draw water and leave me there alone. I wait until morning and think of my children that I left home alone. Anything can happen.

Knowing that water is only available at irregular intervals, water fetchers tend to fill multiple vessels at the kiosks, a circumstance leading to long queues and extended waiting times (Adams, 2018b). To cope with lengthy service interruptions, many households rely on water storage containers that are kept indoors

¹³ According to Rusca and Schwartz (2018, 105), "poor consumers are expected to pay the increasing operational costs of the WUAs, which almost triple the bulk price charged by the Water Board." Pihljak et al. (2019, 5-6) suggest an even higher price difference between bulk water charges and tariffs at the kiosks: in 2017/18, WUAs paid MWK 200 (about USD 0.28) per cubic meter to LWB. For the same volume, kiosk users had to pay MWK 1,000 (about USD 1.40) – five times as much – to the WUAs.

and might occupy considerable space in already crowded dwellings. As one of Rusca's (2017) interviewees relates, in Lilongwe's low-income areas,

There are cases where people are actually investing a lot of money in having water storage facilities, just because of the challenge at stake. And these water storage facilities, they take up a lot of space in the house. And so, you have cases where a human being has to compete for space in the house with a water storage facility.

Storage containers also provide breeding grounds for pathogens and other contaminants that can further compromise the quality of the water. Although kiosk water is treated by LWB before it is pumped through the distribution network, its quality may be affected by the time it reaches a kiosk tap due to insufficient monitoring and infrastructural neglect. This contrasts once again with the situation in more affluent areas, where water quality checks are more routinely conducted and malfunctions are swiftly addressed (Boakye-Ansah et al., 2016; Rusca, Boakye-Ansah et al., 2017).

Kiosk water being expensive, it is regarded as precious by consumers and is normally reserved for drinking and cooking purposes. For domestic chores and personal hygiene, most low-income residents have no choice but to supplement kiosk water with water from other sources. Some of these sources can be considered safe, such as rainwater or water received from a neighbor's tap, but oftentimes, unsafe sources, such as rivers and unprotected shallow wells, present the only available alternative (Adams, 2018b; Adams and Smiley, 2018; Chidya et al., 2016; Rusca, Alda-Vidal et al., 2017; Rusca, Boakye-Ansah et al., 2017). If untreated water comes into contact with the human body, it may result in adverse health effects, such as "cholera, diarrhoea, and skin infections or rashes" (Rusca, Alda-Vidal et al., 2017, 539).

What mix of sources is available to whom, at what time, and at what cost not only depends on LWB as the formal provider of water services but importantly also on power configurations and social relations within Lilongwe's low-income communities (Velzeboer et al., 2018). Despite their low status in the WUA hierarchy, kiosk attendants have a modicum of power over things like customer credit, dispute resolution, and hours of operation (ibid., 125-126).¹⁴ When it comes to private wells, owners are free to decide who gets access and under what conditions. While family and friends may be granted a flat rate, more distant

¹⁴ Water kiosks are not open 24/7 but operate within fixed hours set by kiosk attendants. According to Manda (2009, vii), "[k]iosks do not provide a 24-hour service; most are open for only 6 hours a day (3 hours in the morning and 3 hours in the afternoon), and remain closed overnight." In 2018, LWB was piloting an electronic payment scheme called *E-Madzi* ("electronic water") to "[allow] consumers to buy water ... at any time using smart cards" (LWB, 2018b). *E-Madzi* kiosks resemble the "water ATMs" that have been introduced in other countries such as Kenya (Sarkar, 2019) and India (Schmidt, 2020). The schedule for roll-out and the consequences for WUAs and kiosk users were not yet clear at the time of my fieldwork (November 2018).

acquaintances may be obliged to buy water by the bucket at a higher charge. With more and more wells being dug, competition increases between well owners, which in turn gives customers some power of choice, i.e., they can compare different wells in their area and buy from that owner who offers the highest-quality water for the lowest price (ibid., 127). When kiosk water is unavailable and other sources are deemed unfit for drinking, residents of Area 56 sometimes take the physical and psychological pain to cross into adjacent Area 47 to beg for water: “they take their buckets, walk for half an hour to area 47, and request water there at the houses of rich people with individual connections” (ibid., 127). Whether they will receive water there depends on the goodwill of domestic staff and the generosity of the occupants of the connected houses.¹⁵

In *Lilongwe Water Works?*, LWB’s kiosk manager shows awareness of the disruptive effects of water cuts but explains that shortages in low-income areas are hard to avoid, at least without an increase in production capacity: “we did not have enough water. So it was difficult for Lilongwe Water Board to supply water to the whole city” (quoted in Rusca, 2017). While the kiosk manager invokes notions of absolute scarcity to explain intermittent supply, political ecologists have shown that at least some of this scarcity is intentionally produced by the water board (Alda-Vidal et al., 2018; Tiwale et al., 2018). LWB employees have some discretion in deciding which way they send whatever water is presently available – to the wealthier center and the north where private connections are more prevalent and customers are more likely to complain in the event of a shortage, or to the poorer south where most people rely on water kiosks and “don’t make a noise” even if services were to be interrupted for several days (LWB operational staff, quoted in Tiwale et al., 2018, 327). Oftentimes, the wealthier areas are being privileged over the poorer settlements. As water cuts occur frequently in Lilongwe’s low-income areas, the water board assumes that the residents of those areas will be prepared for shortages, whereas wealthier households, with tap water as their only source, are said to be unable to bridge prolonged periods of shortage. Ironically, the coping mechanisms of low-income residents have thus become a justification for the water board to supply even less water to them.

An early KMU document confirms that the water board is anything but enthusiastic about providing services to low-income communities. For LWB, the residents of low-income areas and informal settlements represent, first and foremost, a customer class that is “un-attractive” and “uneconomic” due to a “culture of non-payment of bills” (LWB, 2005, 5). By delegating water selling and revenue collection to the WUAs, the water board can collect whatever money can be made from the poor while “minimizing its direct presence in low-income areas” (Rusca et al., 2015, 789). This attitude towards the poor is reflective

¹⁵ Such practices of “water sharing” also exist in other African cities such as Khartoum, Sudan (Zug and Graefe, 2014) and Niamey, Niger (Keough and Youngstedt, 2019, 57).

of a widespread “incentive conflict” in the African water sector: “there is no incentive for utilities to pursue social objectives when their performance is measured in financial terms” (Marson and Savin, 2015, 28).

5.3. 2015-2020 Strategic Plan

In 2015, LWB formulated a five-year plan outlining its priorities up to the year 2020 (LWB, 2015b). Improving the adequacy and reliability of water services is one of the key strategic issues identified in the plan. As stated in the document, frequent water shortages and service interruptions can be attributed to an ever-widening gap between water supply and demand. On the supply side, the plan identifies water resource scarcity, catchment degradation, insufficient and deteriorating infrastructure, power blackouts, and high levels of water losses as major causes of inadequate and unreliable services. On the demand side, the water board has difficulty keeping pace with rapid population growth, unplanned urbanization, and a continuous expansion of its supply area into Lilongwe’s peri-urban surroundings. The Central Zone in particular is rapidly expanding westwards (see Figure 5.6: Areas 56-59 and Area 0).¹⁶ One LWB manager elaborated on the challenge of an ever-growing supply area:

The main challenge is, Lilongwe City is expanding exponentially.... [The system] we are having now was designed to accommodate 40,000 customers. That was almost 15 to 20 years ago. But as of now, we have got almost 79,000 customers. So the main challenge is that our supply area has increased. Our mandate is to supply water every time, everywhere, within the city. Currently, we supply [around 80 percent] of the residents of Lilongwe City. And one of the other challenges, you know, people are building outside the city. They come, ‘We need water!’ So you are in-between. You can’t say, ‘We can’t provide you.’ But maybe you tell them, ‘Just wait. We have to assess our reticulation. We have to assess our network.’¹⁷ So the main challenge is that the city is expanding exponentially. (interview, LWB manager F, November 2018)

To meet growing demand for water, the 2015-2020 Strategic Plan contains an implementation schedule with a long list of action items. Activities to augment supply feature prominently on this list and include proposals to increase the storage capacity of Kamuzu I,¹⁸ build a third water treatment plant (Treatment Works III) to raise daily production capacity, and develop an additional river, and possibly also Lake

¹⁶ Areas named “Area 0” in Figures 5.6 and 5.9 have been labeled as such for mapping purposes. These areas have not (yet) been integrated into the city but are part of the water board’s supply area.

¹⁷ LWB cannot simply reject such requests for water because its mandate extends to “surrounding areas” of Lilongwe. Providing water to rapidly growing peri-urban areas overstretches the water board’s current capacity, which is why LWB employees sometimes resort to delaying tactics.

¹⁸ Kamuzu I is the older and smaller dam on the Lilongwe River, pictured in Figure 5.2 above.

Malawi, as alternative water sources.¹⁹ In addition to large-scale infrastructure projects, the plan sets out a specific target regarding water losses: between 2015 and 2020, the water board aims to reduce Non-Revenue Water (NRW) from 36 to 28 percent.

5.4. Reducing Non-Revenue Water

5.4.1. Non-Revenue Water

NRW is a technical concept and one of the most important indicators for measuring water utility performance.²⁰ A World Bank study defines NRW as “the difference between the volume of water put into a water distribution system and the volume that is billed to customers” (Kingdom et al., 2006, 1). According to the International Water Association (IWA), a water industry association, NRW comprises three components: (1) unbilled authorized consumption (e.g., water for firefighting or system maintenance); (2) physical losses; and (3) commercial losses (cf. Kingdom et al., 2006, 1; Lambert, 2002, 2-4). Physical losses, also known as “real” losses, refer to water lost from leakages and overflows. For example, water can be physically lost when a pipe bursts or a service reservoir is filled beyond maximum capacity. Commercial losses, also known as “apparent” losses, describe water that reaches consumers but does not translate into the expected revenue for the utility due to metering errors or unauthorized consumption (including illegal connections). Physical and commercial losses are together referred to as “water losses” and normally account for the major share of NRW.

In the World Bank study, Kingdom et al. (2006) explain that NRW is a common problem among water utilities in developing countries, with levels typically hovering around 35 to 50 percent of water production. Lowering the amount of water lost is expected to increase water availability and utility revenue. But it is also acknowledged that tackling NRW is a complicated task that often encounters resistance from different stakeholders. Repairing physical leakages can be costly (capital-intensive) as it may require an extensive overhaul of old and failing infrastructure, and fixing broken pipes is certainly not a glamorous task, or one likely to win many votes at the polls: “politicians and utility managers ... would rather cut a tape opening a new treatment plant than dig up roads” (ibid., 31) in order to “have something tangible ... to show to their constituency” (ibid., 8). Utility staff, for its part, might “achieve personal gain

¹⁹ Lake Malawi (called Lake Nyasa in Tanzania and Lake Niassa in Mozambique) is the third-largest lake in Africa (Fatch and Swatuk, 2018, 30). The idea to use the lake as a water source for Lilongwe is contested. The distance between Lilongwe and the lake is far (125 km), and Lilongwe lies at a higher altitude, meaning that “the water from Lake Malawi [would] have to be pumped uphill” in order to reach the city (Matebule, 2017). Apart from feasibility and sustainability concerns, the project has been mired in political controversy over contract awarding and vested interests, leading to the dismissal of LWB’s CEO in December 2019 (Kondowe, 2019).

²⁰ Another expression that is sometimes used for NRW is “Unaccounted-For Water” (UFW) (Lambert, 2002, 3).

through fraudulent practices” (ibid., 31) and thus have an incentive to sabotage commercial loss reduction campaigns. Taken together, the study suggests that “[l]eakage reduction is a laborious job, requiring continuous efforts and numerous interventions in the network, which need to be conducted in a properly integrated manner to bring tangible results” (ibid., 28).

5.4.2. 2016 NRW Reduction Strategy

Pursuant to the 2015-2020 Strategic Plan, LWB circulated an NRW Reduction Strategy in October 2016. Drawing on IWA definitions and recommendations, the strategy formulates an even more ambitious target than the strategic plan: to reduce NRW to 25 percent, rather than 28 percent, within just three years.²¹ As stated in the strategy,

The target for LWB is to get [the] NRW rolling figure down to 25% in the next three years from FY 2015/2016. The rolling average for NRW has been in the range [of] 38% to 39% for the past five years which is an indication of minimal progress in reduction of the NRW. This requires a comprehensive strategy to achieve the target by FY 2018/2019. (LWB, 2016b, 4)

In the spirit of comprehensiveness, the strategy outlines measures targeting both physical and commercial losses.

Physical Losses: To get physical losses under control, the water board plans to continue working on the demarcation of so-called District Metered Areas (DMAs). The idea is to subdivide the supply area into 60 DMAs, each comprising about 1,000 connections. At the entry point of each DMA, a bulk meter will be installed to measure the volume of water pumped into the particular area. The DMAs will thus allow for a comparison between water supplied and water consumed at a smaller scale, which will facilitate “the identification of DMAs with high NRW so that efforts of reducing NRW can be concentrated there” (LWB, 2016b, 7). DMAs shall be placed under the supervision of “caretakers,” who will “[act] as the eye, ear and a hands-on person to look for leaks, hear customer complaints and maintain leakages” (ibid., 7) in their respective Caretaker Areas (CTAs).²² Apart from DMA and CTA demarcation, LWB envisages an active leakage control program involving regular network monitoring and leak detection.²³ With regard to reservoir overflows, the water board “will ensure that there is always a functional tank level monitoring

²¹ The target of 25 percent is close to the NRW target proposed by Tynan and Kingdom (2002, 2), who suggest that “unaccounted-for water of less than 23 percent” would be ideal for water utilities in developing countries.

²² Each CTA will cover about 5,000 connections or five DMAs (LWB, 2016b, 7).

²³ Leakages in Lilongwe can often be detected visually. Most pipes are not deep underground and many roads are unpaved, so in the event of a leakage, the water will soon appear at the surface. Still, to improve underground leak detection, LWB would like to use special sonic leak detection tools (e.g., listening sticks, leak noise correlators). These tools would allow the water board “to pinpoint leaks before they come to [the] surface” (LWB, 2016b, 8).

system” in place (ibid., 11). To avoid frequent and prolonged leaks and bursts, LWB plans to improve the management of its assets. This would require it to respond to leakages quickly, use sturdy material for repairs, replace old pipes, and bury uncovered pipes in low-income areas (ibid., 9-11). To prevent high water pressures (which can lead to pipe bursts and heightened water losses in the event of a leakage), the strategy foresees the installation special valves – called pressure-reducing valves – at critical points throughout the network (Figure 5.10).

Figure 5.10. Pressure-Reducing Valves



Source: Photo by author, November 2018.

Commercial Losses: To detect major sources of commercial losses, the water board plans to proceed with a “house-to-house survey” (LWB, 2016b, 14), to be conducted all over the supply area.²⁴ Based on the survey, the caretakers can take targeted action to tackle the commercial aspects of NRW. In the strategy, faulty meters are identified as one important cause of commercial losses. Consequently, the strategy includes measures to improve customer metering and meter accuracy, such as the replacement of all “under-registering or over-registering or stuck meters” in the system (ibid., 13). Errors in meter reading and billing are to be eliminated by means of automated solutions. Illegal connections are singled out as another important source of commercial losses. To bring the number of such connections down, LWB plans a campaign involving media broadcasting and community outreach. These activities are supposed to be accompanied by an amnesty policy for “those who declare, report and give themselves up for illegal connections and water theft” (ibid., 14).

Partnerships are expected to support LWB in working towards its strategic goals and specifically towards NRW reduction. In the 2015-2020 Strategic Plan, the partnership with VEI is explicitly mentioned: “Pivotal to the realisation of preferred outcomes is the change management which takes advantage of our strategic alliances with other water operators including VEI” (LWB CEO, quoted in LWB, 2015b, 4). The 2016 NRW Reduction Strategy likewise contains references to VEI, made in relation to the caretaker approach and awareness raising (LWB, 2016b, 7, 16).

5.5. Water Operator Partnership with VEI

5.5.1. Private-Sector Service Contract (2009-2014)

The collaboration between LWB and VEI originally started not as a WOP but as a four-year service contract.²⁵ The contract was signed in July 2009 as part of a project on peri-urban water supply and sanitation in Lilongwe and Blantyre, funded by the European Investment Bank (EIB), the EU, and the government of Malawi. Service contracting was not the choice of LWB but was prescribed by the EIB as a lending condition for the project. When the service contract was tendered, VEI and the private water company Veolia were shortlisted as bidders. VEI eventually won the contracts for both Lilongwe and Blantyre (Marson and Maggi, 2018; Pascual Sanz et al., 2013).

²⁴ The house-to-house survey already began in March 2016, “with the objective of updating the customer data base and identify those that have illegal connections.” To this end, “survey teams visited each and every property” across the supply area. The teams “conducted interviews, tested water pressure and condition of meters and carried out inspection on all plumbing works.” They also “[replaced] faulty valves” and dealt with “unregistered irregular and illegal connections” (LWB, 2016a, 23).

²⁵ For the characteristics of a service contract, see Chapter 1, Table 1.1.

According to the terms of the Lilongwe contract, VEI's scope of services included a range of tasks. Some required the preparation of concrete deliverables such as reports and program reviews, while others were linked to performance targets measured by KPIs. Specifically, improvements were expected on four KPIs: NRW, water supply in low-income areas, working ratio, and continuity of supply. NRW, for instance, was to be lowered from a baseline of 31 percent to 25 percent, and 372 new water kiosks were to be constructed in Lilongwe's low-income areas over the course of the contract period (LWB and VEI, 2009, Schedule 11). The performance on each of these four indicators would determine the performance-based compensation owed to VEI.

As Marson and Maggi's (2018) research suggests, VEI turned out to be more focused on "timely fulfilment of the reporting requirements instead of addressing the KPIs challenges," and at the end of the original contract period in 2013, the contract had to be extended for another year, until 2014,²⁶ so that VEI would have "more time ... to reach the performance targets that were still unmet" (ibid., O310). Problems were reported in particular with regard to NRW reduction and kiosk construction, as VEI had, by contract, very limited operational and procurement powers, and cooperation from LWB staff was not always forthcoming. A number of misunderstandings and miscommunications between LWB and VEI put the contractual relationship under additional strain, to the effect that "LWB gradually isolated the project activities from the daily routine of the WB [water board], hence providing minimum support for the implementation of the project activities" (Pascual Sanz et al., 2013, 260). The service contract expired in 2014, when the extension year came to an end.

5.5.2. Performance-Based WOP (2015-2019)

In July 2015, LWB and VEI continued their troubled relationship in the form of a WOP that was to last for four years, until June 2019. In contrast to the 2009-2014 service contract, the WOP was not competitively tendered. Rather, an agreement was concluded between the two organizations on the basis of VEI's previous engagement in Lilongwe and "substantial evidence that the partnership is the best fit for achieving the ambitious goals of LWB in the medium to long term" (LWB and VEI, 2015, 3). The stated goal of the WOP was "to raise the overall efficiency and thus the creditworthiness of LWB and make it, technically as well as financially, well prepared for the huge challenges ahead" (ibid., 5). What distinguishes the WOP agreement from the previous service contract is a focus on implementation, rather than report writing, and an explicit statement that progress will not be the responsibility of VEI alone but will require active participation and commitment from both partners: "VEI shall pro-actively lead the

²⁶ The contract allowed for such an extension, stating that: "If both Parties agree, the Service Contract may be extended for a period up to twelve (12) months after the end of the Term" (LWB and VEI, 2009, 7).

implementation while LWB will mobilise human and logistic resources to allow for training of staff and perform the work required” (ibid., 13).

The push to shift from the service contract to the WOP reportedly came from VEI, which wanted to make sure that the collaboration would become more of a “joint effort” moving forward:

Under the private-sector service contract, Vitens²⁷ was the private sector. They have to do the work. Of course we still have to work together, but whether you [LWB] are just watching or what [it doesn't matter]. So we wanted to change that kind of arrangement, to say it should be joint effort, where there is also clear capacity building. It shouldn't be just a matter of saying, ‘Vitens, you are supposed to do this. When are you giving us our hydraulic model?’ So I think that was the thinking behind the changing, to say it should be more of a [partnership]. (interview, LWB manager C, November 2018)

I think they [VEI] were trying to run away from working like a consultancy. They would want us to also, Lilongwe Water Board, to participate fully and make sure things are working: transfer the knowledge from Vitens to Lilongwe Water Board. This is now another type of water partnership. (interview, LWB manager D, November 2018)

What is special about the WOP between LWB and VEI – and, strictly speaking, against GWOPA's not-for-profit principle – is the idea of performance-based compensation, which was carried over from the service contract into the new partnership. The tasks of the WOP were organized into two components, and each task had a weight and a monetary value assigned to it (see Table 5.4). The first component comprised a number of tasks, mostly related to the development and operationalization of technical systems, while the second component consisted of a single task: the mentoring of zone managers and the reduction of persistently high NRW levels, from now 35 percent to 25 percent. Upon successful completion of the tasks, VEI would be rewarded with a performance-based compensation of EUR 250,000 for the first component and a performance-based compensation of EUR 640,000 for the second component, to be funded through a loan from the EIB under a new project, the Lilongwe Water Resources Efficiency Programme.

²⁷ LWB staff refers to VEI as “VEI” or “Vitens.”

Table 5.4. WOP Tasks and Performance-Based Compensation

Component 1	Weight (%)	Performance-based compensation (EUR)
Develop and operationalize a hydraulic model	40	100,000
Develop and operationalize a SCADA system	15	37,500
Develop and implement a water demand management strategy	5	12,500
Conduct design and impact assessment studies for water transmission mains	10	25,000
Develop and implement asset management tool	10	25,000
Develop and implement stores management tool	10	25,000
Identify and coordinate two effective WOPs between LWB and partners in Africa	10	25,000
Total	100	250,000
Component 2	Weight (%)	Performance-based compensation (EUR)
Reduce NRW to 25 percent and mentor the zone managers of two zones	100	640,000
Total	100	640,000

Source: LWB and VEI (2015, 9: Table 1, 10: Table 2).

Note: SCADA = Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition.

Based on their analysis of VEI’s service contracts in Lilongwe and Blantyre, Pascual Sanz et al. (2013) warned against an obsession with KPIs in capacity-development partnerships. They argued that quantitative performance indicators – commonly used in private-sector contracting and utility “benchmarking” – were unsuitable to measure progress in WOPs, as their use might “provoke frustration between partners, who remain under the impression that no improvements are being achieved” (ibid., 244). Improving organizational performance takes time, and more intangible gains in individual learning, relationships, and capacity may not immediately translate into KPI changes. Despite this note of caution, the WOP between LWB and VEI seemed to “have inherited from PPPs the *modus operandi* of merely looking at the KPI gains of the targeted water operator as the unique yardstick against which to measure the effectiveness of the intervention” (ibid., 244). Although the partnership covered other aspects beyond

NRW (see Table 5.4, Component 1), it became intensely fixated on the target of reducing water losses to 25 percent:

[In the WOP agreement] there were, I think, several performance indicators or deliverables. Non-revenue water was just one. I think they [VEI] have done well on the others, like water demand management. I think they really did well. Vitens played a key part in the 2015 water rationing. There was a drought, so we had to ration water to the city. I think they played a key role. But the main issue that people want to see results is non-revenue water. So when they mention Vitens, everybody talks about non-revenue water. (interview, LWB manager G, November 2018)

The exaltation of this single metric not only led to frustration related to smaller successes being overlooked, as predicted by Pascual Sanz et al. (2013), but effectively locked the entire partnership into a vicious cycle of pressure, blame, and fear.

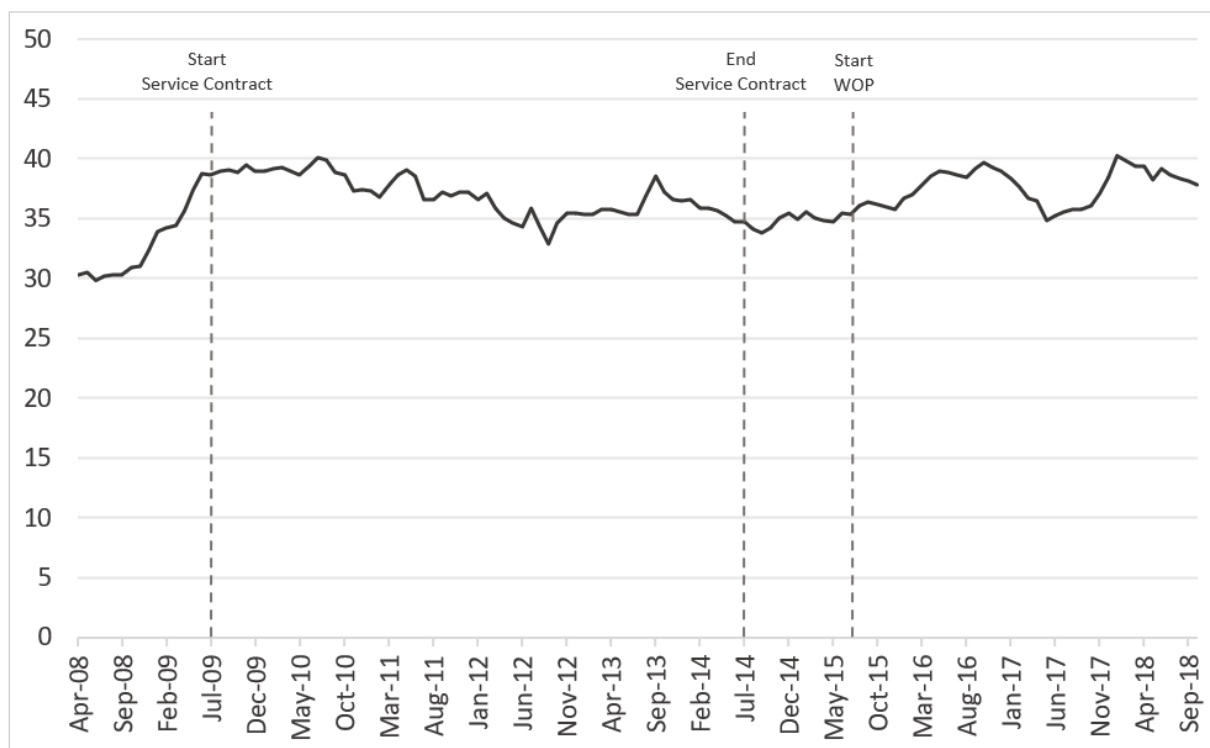
5.5.3. Chasing an Elusive Target

When I visited LWB for fieldwork in November 2018, I quickly learned that things had not gone as planned with the partnership. NRW levels in particular continued to be far above target (see Figure 5.11). At the start of the WOP in July 2015, NRW stood at 35.3 percent.²⁸ Instead of going down, water losses went up during the first year of the partnership, reaching 38.6 percent in July 2016 and 39.7 percent in October 2016. Losses briefly fell to 34.8 percent in May 2017, just to rise again to over 40 percent in January 2018. In September 2018, the water board recorded an NRW level of 38.1 percent. Based on a system input of 37 million cubic meters per year, this translates into an annual volumetric loss of 14 million cubic meters.²⁹

²⁸ NRW data reported in this section refers to 12-month rolling averages.

²⁹ How much of the NRW is caused by physical versus commercial losses is not recorded in the data I obtained from LWB. Based on measurements in Areas 15, 18, and 28 and various modeling tools, Harawa et al. (2016) show how NRW in Lilongwe could be “partitioned” into physical and commercial losses.

Figure 5.11. LWB: NRW Percentage (12-Month Average)



Source: LWB spreadsheet, November 2018. Author's representation.

According to one LWB manager, the fact that NRW was even higher than the original baseline, three years into the WOP, implied serious doubts about the effectiveness of the partnership:

Apparently, non-revenue water is the biggest challenge that Lilongwe Water Board has as an organization.... The worrying thing is that we had a baseline [35 percent]. If we had just gone a little below the baseline, maybe we could say the efforts have paid off. But where you have a baseline and after a number of years, you are *above* the baseline, then it doesn't reflect well. The figures show that the efforts have not paid dividends. The worst that could happen was to maintain it [NRW] at where it was. But now, to let it go *above* where it was, it needs a lot of soul searching, it needs a lot of reflection. (interview, LWB manager D, November 2018)

5.5.4. Pressure from Management

In 2015, VEI started its activities in the Northern Zone,³⁰ as stipulated in the WOP agreement:

VEI shall take full control (management) of the operation of two zones, starting with Northern Zone till this Zone is properly managed and NRW is consistently going down and will gradually (but not later than 2 years after starting in Northern Zone) move to Southern Zone. LWB will second a Zone Manager for every zone managed by VEI who will be mentored by VEI for skills transfer and sustainability. This is aimed at inculcating in LWB staff, the work attitude that will enhance efficiency and effectiveness. (LWB and VEI, 2015, 6)

When water loss reductions were deemed insufficient, this gradual approach was abandoned in the hopes of accelerating progress. At some point, VEI was “just working in all the zones, with all the zone managers” (interview, LWB manager B, November 2018). In addition to an RPM and periodically visiting short-term experts from the Netherlands, VEI had hired Jos,³¹ a medium-term expert specifically tasked with the partnership’s NRW reduction component. His job was to coach zone managers and to “inculcate” a proper “work attitude” at the water board.

A hands-on engineer, Jos took me along his daily rounds several times during my fieldwork. Driving back and forth between the zone offices, he appeared to be well-acquainted with LWB, its infrastructure and operational staff. He liked being on the road and spending time in the field, searching for leaks and troubleshooting problems. He was known to everyone we happened to meet on our way, from zone managers to plumbers and security guards. Jos seemed to enjoy his work with the zones, but, at the same time, he was under considerable pressure to deliver results. If LWB continued to miss its NRW target, VEI would not get the performance pay of EUR 640,000 – plus he himself would be out of a job the following year. Whether he had a chance to return to Evides, his home company in Rotterdam, Jos did not know, as he had been abroad for quite some time.

To reduce NRW, VEI was supporting the zones with a number of activities, including DMA demarcation, bulk meter installation, pressure management, the caretaker approach, domestic meter replacement, and the introduction of prepaid water meters.³² At the time of my visit, Jos was busy in particular with the

³⁰ The Northern Zone was selected as the starting point because it was regarded as an “easy” zone for NRW reduction, meaning that quick wins were being expected. In the Northern Zone, especially in some of the industrial areas, “the system is new, the reticulation is new, very few troubles” (interview, LWB manager F, November 2018).

³¹ Names in Section 5.5 have been changed.

³² The introduction of prepaid water meters in Lilongwe is not further discussed here. It should be noted, however, that this technology could have severe implications for water use in poorer parts of the city, as suggested by experiences from South Africa (von Schnitzler, 2008, 2016).

house-to-house survey. A first round of the survey had been completed in 2016 (see Section 5.4.2 above), but data from that first survey had not been properly recorded or had gone missing. To repeat the survey, Jos had initiated the temporary hiring of local “assessment teams” in mid-2018. The teams were being sent across the supply area to check for commercial losses. Jos had drawn up a special form for them, which they were expected to fill out during plot visits and return to their zone’s distribution engineer. The form asked the assessors to check for account numbers, water bills, meter tampering, meter accuracy, and illegal connections, and also reminded them to keep an eye out for leakages (physical losses). Regarding meter tampering, the teams were supposed to look for broken meter seals. Regarding meter accuracy, they had been instructed to carry out a simple “bucket test”: fill a 20-liter bucket of water and check whether the meter is rotating and accurately recording the volume. If the meter shows a different result, it should be repaired or replaced (Figure 5.12).

Figure 5.12. Team of Plumbers Replacing a Stuck Water Meter, Southern Zone



Source: Photo by author, November 2018.

A passage from my fieldnotes gives an impression of Jos's work in the zones:

Jos picks me up at 7:30am in Area 47. We first drive to the Central Zone office. Jos agreed with Central Zone staff on Friday that they would draw up a list of 30 randomly chosen water meters (in high-density areas as well as low-density areas), so that these could be tested. We get the list. We also run into a few guys from an assessment team who are sitting outside with the forms that Jos has created. He looks over the forms and wonders why it says 'yes' every time for accuracy of water meter. He explains the bucket test to them again, and also tells them to make sure they do their work properly, to make sure they are finding leakages, illegal connections, etc. He also tells them they will only keep their jobs if they find these things.

We then drive to the Northern Zone office, where we briefly talk to the Northern Zone manager. Jos wants to check the meters from disconnected accounts. They are usually put back in as soon as the customers start paying again, but Jos suspects that they are completely dried out and will no longer work, which might then again be a problem for NRW. We go into the zone accountant's office, where the disconnected meters are laying around on a pile [Figure 5.13]. We pick out a few of them. Maarten (short-term expert) will later check these on the meter test bench for functionality.

We then drive back to the Central Zone office, where we briefly speak with Andrew, the Central Zone manager. Jos reminds him that 'we need to find the leakages, we need to find the illegal connections, we need to find the unpaid accounts,' and uproot the entire connection after three months so that people cannot re-connect illegally – otherwise the zones can't keep the assessment teams. 'We need to find the anomalies.' He also reminds Andrew to give feedback and to check in with the assessment teams to show that he [Andrew] cares and to keep them motivated. Positive feedback is also important if the teams are doing a good job and are finding things. A meeting Jos tried to schedule with the three zone managers for 10am this morning cannot take place. The Southern Zone manager is in South Africa for studies and Andrew tells us that he has a conflicting meeting.

We drive on to the Southern Zone office, where Jos checks in with Grace, the distribution engineer there. He reminds her to print the updated version of the form (with the seal control column) for the teams. If the assessment teams cannot get a customer's account number, they need to make sure to at least write the nearest account number down.

Figure 5.13. Disconnected Water Meters, Northern Zone Office



Source: Photo by author, November 2018.

Driving from zone to zone, Jos confessed that he sometimes grew frustrated with the working culture at the water board and what he perceived as low staff morale: “Even people who start new here get demotivated over time. If one plumber only visits a few plots a day, the other one asks, ‘Why should I do more?’” He also felt misunderstood by VEI’s managers back in the Netherlands. In his view, there was not enough appreciation for the progress that had already been made in terms of NRW reduction, even if the 25-percent target might be unattainable. He felt equally let down by the RPM in Lilongwe. While the RPM mostly dealt with LWB’s upper management at the head office and “has a lot of reporting to do,” Jos’s work was taking place in the field, in close contact with operational staff. At one point, he had told the RPM, “You need to be the bad guy, I need to be the good guy. Because otherwise, they no longer work with me.” In practice, however, much of the “dirty” work of NRW reduction was still left to Jos and his counterparts in the zones.

5.5.5. Resistance from the Zones

The WOP between LWB and VEI was not easy from the start, as the relationship had already suffered several blows during the preceding service contract (see Section 5.5.1 above). Cultural misunderstandings and confusion about VEI's role in Lilongwe (service contractor? consultant? partner?) continued to overshadow the partnership. The intense pressure to reduce NRW did nothing to remedy these tensions. Confronted with the expectations passed down via Jos, LWB staff became more and more defensive towards VEI. By the time of my visit, many staff members seemed to have quietly withdrawn from the partnership or were boycotting it altogether. Jos felt the effects in his daily work, for example when it came to scheduling meetings. In one of our conversations, he reflected on how things had slowed down over time: "Initially, when it was all still talking, there was a lot of enthusiasm about the partnership, but now, I need to chase them for meetings. In the WOP meetings, almost nobody shows up."

5.5.5.1. Relational Damage

When I interviewed LWB staff about the partnership with VEI, the extent of the relational damage began to emerge. Trying to make staff work hard on NRW reduction, Jos had once forcefully interrupted a tea break and asked people to go back to work. The story of this incident spread like wildfire throughout the organization. Instead of acknowledging the desperation behind this action, Jos's colleagues from the Netherlands jokingly attributed it to the outspoken nature of the Dutch – and Jos, being from Rotterdam, was of course *especially* outspoken.³³ Jos's Malawian counterparts had an entirely different interpretation, however. For them, the tea break episode represented a serious personal offense that continued to weigh heavily on the partnership. In an interview, an LWB employee related the incident in the following terms:

The best approach is to be with the people. There is no way I can say, 'No, you are my subordinate, I'm the boss.' I have a cup of tea in my hand, just an example. Then, you are also having a cup of tea in your hand. There is no way I should say, 'Throw it away!' while I drink mine, because I'm pushing you to go and work, for example. I'm just taking an example. I'm taking tea. You are also taking tea. Then, because I'm more powerful than you, I'm telling you to throw it away, but the bottom line is, you and me, we are both still hungry. We still need to eat. Despite the hierarchy, we are both human beings. And the feelings that you have are the same that I do have. If I'm hungry, you also feel hungry. No matter you are my subordinate. So if I say, 'Throw away the food!' – where do you then get energy to do the work? (interview, LWB manager B, November 2018)

³³ "The Dutch have a reputation for being very direct in their speech and their approach," writes Vossestein (2001, 65) in his humorous book, *Dealing with the Dutch*. The Dutch team in Lilongwe often reaffirmed and joked about this stereotype, suggesting that it was especially true for people from the Rotterdam area.

The fact that VEI was putting pressure on the zones and the assessment teams to bring NRW levels down, and was “using fear as a motivator” (interview, LWB analyst, November 2018), engendered a sense of inequality and subordination among LWB staff. But it also triggered resentment and resistance, especially among higher-level staff in the zones. As the LWB employee went on,

Several years I’ve been working with people. The use of power or force, to force a human being to do something, most of the time, it doesn’t work. You have to use diplomacy. But if you are too militant, people resist, or they will do things because they fear you, or they will cheat and say they have done something but they haven’t, because they are afraid of you. They will never tell you the truth. (interview, LWB manager B, November 2018)

VEI’s intimidating behavior was seen as especially problematic because Dutch “experts” lacked credibility in the eyes of LWB staff. In the Netherlands, NRW levels are very low,³⁴ the network is well-planned, and the institutional environment is much less politicized. While Dutch staff might have the capabilities to perform well in the Netherlands, “the working environment here is totally different” (interview, LWB manager C, November 2018). Differences in working environment may be less relevant when it comes to technical systems: “A hydraulic model is a hydraulic model. GIS is GIS. SCADA is SCADA. So in those particular areas, you are very assured to say we would receive good support or expertise” (interview, LWB manager C, November 2018). However, when it comes to complex challenges like NRW reduction, VEI faces no comparable problems at home.

Credibility is further undermined by the fact that Dutch short-term experts regularly visit LWB, while very few staff members from Lilongwe have been invited to the Netherlands.³⁵ For LWB employees, the extreme imbalance or one-sidedness in staff exchange contradicts the very notion of “partnership,” and deprives them of the opportunity to experience first-hand the alleged superior performance of the Dutch water companies:

it’s not many people here that have had the chance to go and see what Vitens does [in the Netherlands], to appreciate the practical part. When you teach, you also have to demonstrate. If you talk of people not being late, you can come here and preach to us that in the Netherlands, it is so ideal, that at the touch of a button, everything happens. But a human being would want to see and appreciate some of these things. How do we believe you that that is the case? ... You can also see that in terms of exchange visits ... we have more people

³⁴ NRW in the Netherlands is 5.5 percent (VEWIN, 2017, 46).

³⁵ At the beginning of a partnership, VEI normally organizes an “exposure visit” to the Netherlands for senior management, “to build trust” and to show “what kind of company we are” (interview, VEI CEO, August 2019). Thereafter, mentee visits to the Netherlands become more sporadic, if they happen at all. Mentees are sometimes invited for Amsterdam International Water Week or sponsored to take courses at the IHE Delft.

from Vitens [coming here] but we don't have anybody from Lilongwe Water Board that goes that side. So it's an exchange which is tilted on one side.... Those are simple things, but they play a role in promoting the partnership. How do you make one understand that it is a partnership? I'm not saying that people from Lilongwe Water Board should go to Vitens. But those are simple things that one needs to critically think through when you are developing a partnership. (interview, LWB manager D, November 2018)

As illustrated in this statement (“I’m not saying that people from Lilongwe Water Board should go to Vitens”), many interviewees were careful not to formulate an explicit request to visit the Netherlands, perhaps because they were aware that VEI might dismiss such a request as a pretext for a “paid holiday” or a “shopping trip” to Europe. VEI staff frequently used such terms when discussing the idea of return visits with me, hinting that what mentees really wanted was to pocket allowances and “be two weeks in Amsterdam to do shopping,” rather than engage in productive learning activities. VEI staff further argued that return visits would not make sense since most mentees do not speak Dutch and would have no “expert role” to play in the Netherlands. What was not mentioned was the possibility that return visits might reduce the number of Dutch short-term missions, which would subvert the goal of using WOPs as a tool for staff development and recruitment.

5.5.5.2. *Loss of Focus*

By 2018, with only one year left to meet the NRW target, time pressure had become a commanding feature of the partnership. LWB staff described the activities on NRW reduction as “a rush-rush kind of thing” that was lacking in focus and patience: “because of trying to get non-revenue water rapidly reduced ... we are all over the place. Do this. Stop. Do that. Without coming back to assess the learnings, the experiences, from the activities” (interview, LWB manager E, November 2018). Rather than trying to reduce water losses in all DMAs at once, as prescribed by VEI, many at LWB preferred to return to a more structured, incremental approach: a number of select DMAs would be thoroughly assessed before lessons learned would be scaled up across the supply area. One zone engineer provided the following account of time pressure in relation to the assessment teams:

I think the problem mostly is time, I would say. I think it's like we are running out of time.... It's something we should also like to present to our management, because they are also worried to say, 'OK you guys, what are you doing there? The teams are working. Why can't we see change?' So we've got a different approach now [in the zones] to say, 'OK, let's first of all focus on one area and see what comes out from that.' Because initially, what we were doing is, around May, the Vitens idea, they brought in the [assessment teams], the ones who are going to the field. They are plumbers, but they are looking at where we are losing water. That's when they brought those guys. So the target was, before the end of this year, they were supposed to cover all

the DMAs, so from May till December – that’s just not possible.... So we were saying, ‘OK, can you give us maybe some time to focus on something, on a small part?’ ... The guys [assessment teams] are moving plot by plot, it’s just not possible.... I think they [VEI] also have some time periods and then they want to see change, but we said, ‘OK, no. Let’s give it some time and patience. Then we can do much better.’ (interview, LWB engineer, November 2018)

5.5.5.3. Tunnel Vision

The heavy pressure put on the partnership had yet another consequence: VEI staff in Malawi seemed to have fallen into a sort of “tunnel vision,” which increasingly isolated the team from day-to-day realities on the ground. In interviews, LWB staff shared the perception that the team from VEI was perhaps so preoccupied with its own success or failure that it had not taken the time “to get a buy-in from how the local setting is” or to “assess the local environment and then try to come up with a solution that will work,” given the local context and cultural specificities in Malawi (interview, LWB manager E, November 2018). Instead of taking ideas from LWB staff seriously and trying to combine Dutch and Malawian expertise, the team had reportedly adopted an attitude of “we know it,” rejecting local knowledge and input:

When you are working, you have to know that everyone has got very small knowledge. And in order for the partnership to thrive, to progress, we have to take very small knowledge from these people we are working with. What I’m trying to say is, let’s say, VEI is here. They have to make sure that they are taking into account ideas of locals. We are engaging VEI for much more expertise, but on the ground, we know one, two, three things. This expertise, and the one, two, three things we know, when we combine them, we tackle non-revenue water. But saying that, when a partner comes, ‘No, they failed to reduce non-revenue water. Now we are here to reduce it. Whatever they say, they don’t know anything,’ that’s the problem. (interview, LWB manager F, November 2018)

Another LWB employee echoed these concerns. VEI should have taken the time to first understand existing organizational structures, and then should have built on what was already there, rather than simply dismissing local ways:

The first thing is to accept that you are there, and you are there to assist the people. And you have found the people working. For example, I found the people working in [this zone]. The zone existed even in my absence. It was there. But maybe I needed just to have a look at areas of improvement. It’s not that they were not doing things, or they were not working, but you just have to look at some loopholes, where you need to improve. But not that all what they were doing is wrong. So that conception has to be in mind of VEI as well. Not that whatever Lilongwe Water Board was doing is wrong. No. Things were done this way for a purpose,

or there were some structures which were instituted for a purpose. The first thing is to investigate why is that happening, and where can we improve it, before you actually disregard it. (interview, LWB manager B, November 2018)

One LWB employee attributed VEI's behavior to the fact that the WOP was funded by an external donor, the EIB. Officially, VEI and LWB were the protagonists, but with the EIB holding the purse strings, the partnership seemed to have mutated into "a European thing," where funding conditions were taking precedence over local needs and perspectives:

You know, these partnerships, especially [with] African water utility providers, basically, what happens is, we have got a problem, us as Lilongwe Water Board. We want to reduce non-revenue water. Then EIB comes in, the European Investment Bank, or the World Bank, 'We will fund you. We will fund you to reduce non-revenue water. As one of the activities, you have to have a partner.' Then a partner comes from Europe. Now the partner knows the money is coming from Europe. Now when it comes down to it, instead of respecting Lilongwe Water Board, they say, 'Lilongwe Water Board is not our boss. Our boss is EIB.' [But in a partnership] Lilongwe Water Board has to be first. EIB has to be just behind the scenes. You have to be VEI and Lilongwe Water Board. Something like this. That would be OK. But it's like they are removing Lilongwe Water Board. Then [it's] EIB and VEI. Something like this. Now you are doing a European thing. (interview, LWB manager F, November 2018)

If VEI's priority was to cater to EIB requirements, LWB's concern was to keep the water flowing in Malawi's capital city. In an interview, a zone employee named Charles explained how NRW reduction figured into the water board's order of priorities:

Me: If there has been progress in other areas of the WOP, why not in terms of non-revenue water reduction? Why is non-revenue water such a big challenge?

Charles: I think the way we are structured, Lilongwe Water Board, if you look at our vision and mission, we are about providing water.³⁶ So it's in everybody's mind that we are about providing water. This is where we have differences with VEI. Because VEI came here primarily to reduce non-revenue water. So their focus is squarely on reducing non-revenue water. Whereas us, our focus primarily is to provide water, at whatever means. And sometimes, in the efforts to provide water, you end up increasing non-revenue water. So it's an organizational, it's a cultural thing that we are not geared to reduce non-revenue water. I think we are more geared to provide water. I give you an example. And this is evident in most of the way we do our work. If we have a breakdown with the pumps, the high-lift pumps, within a day [they will be fixed]. Or if we run out of flocculants that we put in the treatment plants, within a day, we are going to [find a replacement]. But if I

³⁶ LWB's motto is "Potable water all the time for all" (LWB, 2015b, iii).

request a pressure-reducing valve, because this area has a lot of high pressures and the pipes are breaking, I'm telling you, it's going to take years. You see, the urgency that we put on providing water is not the same urgency that we put on non-revenue water reduction. We've always thought non-revenue water issues are secondary. So for me, I think it's just the culture and the way we are geared. We've never put much emphasis on non-revenue water reduction.

Me: So the priorities of VEI and Lilongwe Water Board do not always align?

Charles: It's a tricky balance. I always have fights with Jos because, let's say, Jos sees a leakage in the streets: 'You need to fix it right now!' And I say, 'Jos, that's a very big pipe. If I close it, downtown will not have water for eight hours.' Water is a political [issue], is a socio-economic good anyway. There is politics in that. The public doesn't understand that we closed it [the pipe] because we are trying to reduce non-revenue water. They don't care. They just want to have water in the tap. So I tell him, 'I'll work on it tomorrow.'³⁷ Then he says, 'No, no, no! We are losing water! We are going to lose so many liters by tomorrow!' So you see how the priorities sometimes differ.

With the WOP approaching its end, VEI increasingly closed itself off from outside influences and alternative ways of working, to the extent that "they [VEI] are not knowing what is really happening" (interview, LWB manager F, November 2018). While VEI kept pushing for a comprehensive strategy covering all DMAs at once, the zones decided to embrace a slower, step-by-step approach. The decision to shift to "a focused DMA approach" (interview, LWB manager E, November 2018) was taken after a team from LWB had visited the Water and Sanitation Corporation (WASAC) of Rwanda as part of a new South-South WOP, sponsored by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).³⁸ In Kigali, the team had seen the advantages of proceeding at a slower pace and then advocated for a similar approach back home in Lilongwe. Apart from the JICA-sponsored WOP, LWB was engaged in a PUP with Severn Trent of the UK in the 1980s (Hall et al., 2005, 20, 42-43) and in a WOP with eThekweni Water and Sanitation of South Africa between 2014 and 2015.³⁹ In addition, the water board has maintained a long-standing cooperation with Uganda's NWSC.

³⁷ "Tomorrow" here means "another time" or "someday." In contrast to the Dutch, Malawians tend to communicate in indirect ways to maintain harmonious relationships (Communicaid, 2020).

³⁸ The MOU for this partnership was signed in July 2017. A team from LWB visited WASAC in November 2018. A third operator, the Embu Water and Sanitation Company (EWASCO) of Kenya, is also part of the partnership.

³⁹ The LWB-eThekweni partnership was one of the short-term African WOPs funded by OFID (see Chapter 2). The resulting PIP can be downloaded at <https://oldgwopa.pre.upcnet.es/es/perfiles-wop/e-thekweni-durban-south-africa-with-lilongwe-water-board-malawi-on-pip-development>.

5.6. Water Operator Partnership with NWSC

5.6.1. Dreampipe II WOP (2017-2018)

The cooperation between LWB and NWSC started in 2006 (Andsen, 2018), shortly after the creation of External Services in Uganda. Over the years, the two utilities have been engaged in various consultancies and capacity development interventions, with NWSC acting as the consultant or mentor and LWB acting as the client or mentee. The most recent initiative was launched in August 2017 in the form of a small pilot WOP, facilitated by the African Water Association (AfWA) under a program called Dreampipe II. The WOP was dedicated to NRW reduction and was intended to support LWB in “establishing an operational and effective NRW Unit” (AfWA et al., 2017, 4). More specifically, the following activities and outputs were envisioned under the partnership:

- a) The project will start with an initial audit of the NRW in the 04 identified areas (1, 2, 7 and 8) in the southern zone of LWB water network.
- b) The project will provide a clear road-map (Performance Improvement Plan: PIP) for the improvement of NRW in the identified areas including capacity building of the established NRW team within the utility.
- c) The project will provide a Short Term Action Plan (6 months) ... for the improvement of the NRW reduction. This will be concluded in February 2018 by the design of a scaling up project ... including investment needs. (ibid., 4)

In October 2017, a team from LWB visited NWSC to learn about NRW reduction experiences in Uganda. The Dreampipe II project ended in February 2018, but shortly thereafter, in March 2018, another visit to Kampala took place, “for a learning session about how they [NWSC] are dealing with their illegal connections” (interview, LWB manager A, November 2018).

5.6.2. Criminalizing Unauthorized Consumption

In technical terms, illegal connections form part of unauthorized consumption and contribute to the commercial loss component of NRW (see Section 5.4.1 above). In 2013, UN-Habitat, in collaboration with NWSC, published a manual with practical advice on reducing unauthorized consumption (UN-Habitat, 2013). According to the manual, “illegal water use is a serious problem for many small urban utilities and unless it is brought under control, it will be difficult for these utilities to achieve financial viability” (ibid., 2). The manual identifies six categories of illegal use: meter by-passing; illegal connection; illegal reconnection; fetching water before the meter; meter reversal; and meter tampering. Illegal connection occurs when a water user “is not even a customer to the water supply system” but has “simply connected themselves to the network” (ibid., 8). To eradicate illegal connections and other forms

of illegal water use, the manual recommends to start with a well-advertised “amnesty period of three months ... during which customers who declare that they have illegal connections will not be penalized” (ibid., 12). As soon as the amnesty period is over, however, “it is important to start the hunt” (ibid., 13): an “illegal use reduction team” should “comb the entire area” (ibid., 13) and impose steep fines on those who are caught. In the process, the team should enlist the help of “informers,” described as “simple people who need cash” (ibid., 13). The team should also conduct itself with a certain degree of “boldness,” since it “will be dealing with wrong people/thieves” (ibid., 31).

5.6.2.1. The Ugandan Approach

In interviews with LWB staff, I learned that NWSC has gone even further in its own illegal use reduction program in Uganda. The corporation has established a Water Loss Prevention Unit (WALOPU) that functions “like a police within the water utility company, where the laws of the police are religiously followed. You detain somebody, you interrogate, those kinds of things” (interview, LWB manager E, November 2018). The way NWSC is handling illegal connections apparently made a big impression on LWB staff. Several staff members I interviewed in Lilongwe highlighted NWSC’s “approach to illegal connections and water theft” as an important area of learning:

[What was good was] their approach to illegal connections and water theft. They [NWSC] have a whole, sort of, a police within the water board that is solely tasked to ... arrest culprits of illegal connections. They are very serious on the arrests. Actually, they have now established a water utility’s court. Those cases are not tried in the ordinary courts. They have a special court so that they can speed up their prosecution of those issues. So I thought that’s something that we could learn. They are very serious on illegal connections. (interview, LWB manager G, November 2018)

They [NWSC] appear to be doing well, especially on what they call WALOPU.... So we went and benchmarked with them and then we came back and also implemented a similar arrangement.... So far, we are just moving together with the police in terms of the investigations, but we have not yet established a police unit. We already wrote to the police, I think last year, where we proposed that we should also have a similar kind of arrangement. We are also thinking of lobbying with the courts, because that’s what they [NWSC] did.... The issue of stealing water actually is not taken seriously [by the courts].... But we want also to engage them [the courts] so that they appreciate the implications. (interview, LWB manager E, November 2018)

A water board magazine, published in November 2018, describes the Ugandan approach in more detail:

NWSC Business Relations Manager, Joseph Ndegeya said they established WALOPU to handle water loss and detect illegal water connections. WALOPU is made of five major arms which include technical, security,

commercial, public relations and revenue committee. ‘We had problems with illegal water connections since the courts were preoccupied with other cases and our cases were taking long to be resolved at times,’ he added. Ndegeya disclosed that they engaged the judiciary to set-up a specialized court with trained magistrates to handle cases of illegal water connections speedily. ‘Fortunately, the judiciary accepted to have a specialized court in order to handle illegal water connections in urgency, and it has worked perfectly in meeting our stiffer sentences,’ the NWSC Business Manager said. Police are also involved in the fight against illegal connections and they have a special unit within WALOPU. ‘We have Police officers who are seconded to the NWSC offices for six to 12 months so that they could specially handle the issues of illegal water connections professionally without delays,’ Ndegeya narrated. The media too plays an important role in the fight against water theft. ‘The media is involved at all levels and are very instrumental in publicizing and exposing those that are implicated in illegal connections. Some newspapers have specific pages titled “Name and Shame” through which those arrested are exposed.’ WALOPU has also key informers who help in investigating and providing information on illegal connections suspected cases. (LWB, 2018c, 21)

A news article, published by the *Nyasa Times*,⁴⁰ describes LWB’s March 2018 visit to Kampala:

Ugandan National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC) Principal Legal officer, Aloysious Kaijuka has said illegal water connections are theft and culprits should be given stiff punishment. He said this during a presentation to member[s] of Lilongwe Water Board (LWB) [during a] benchmarking visit to Kampala, Uganda to appreciate the initiative being carried out by NWSC. Kaijuka said ‘illegal water connections should not be treated with kid gloves and Water Boards need to stand up to stamp out the malpractices.’ He said illegal water connections work to the disadvantage of the water supplying institutions. ‘If you can calculate the loss of water through such acts you will find that a lot of money is being waste[d] through illegal means and this should not be taken lightly,’ Kaijuka hinted. (*Nyasa Times*, 2018c)

As suggested by these accounts, NWSC is working closely with the police, the courts, and the media in Uganda to eliminate illegal connections. Police officers from WALOPU carry out investigations, arrests, and interrogations. Suspects can then be handed over to “a specialized court” with accelerated proceedings. Extensive media reporting is intended to publicly denounce illegal water users and deter others from connecting to the network illegally. WALOPU also recruits “key informers,” presumably poorer community members who agree to pass on information for money. NWSC employees shared this approach with their counterparts from Lilongwe, emphasizing the revenue losses caused by illegal connections.

⁴⁰ The *Nyasa Times* is an online news outlet reporting on Malawi.

5.6.2.2. *Replication in Lilongwe*

NWSC's air of superiority and its insistence on being the mentor in the partnership did not sit easily with LWB, however. While NWSC has been trying to stylize itself as one of the best-performing water utilities in Africa, the team from Lilongwe spotted some inconsistencies in the narrative of "turnaround" success:

To be honest, they [NWSC] had a reputation of doing fine when we went for the mentor and mentee relationship. But when we went there, I think we did not really find them very much ahead of us. So even though it was a mentor-mentee kind of relationship ... the Ugandans, I don't think they were very far away from us. So it was somehow a bit difficult, because I mean, you ask for their non-revenue water figure, and then you are getting two different figures from this person, that person, you are not sure which one is correct. So we were somehow not very impressed with the way they are, despite the fact that they have [an image] outside that shows that they are doing fine. (interview, LWB manager A, November 2018)

NWSC's perceived posturing reportedly prevented the team from articulating its views and essentially turned the partnership into a one-way transfer of knowledge.

Despite some (unspoken) disagreements about role distribution and communication style, the Ugandan approach to illegal connections apparently struck a chord with the visitors from Malawi. In contrast to VEI, NWSC was accepted as a credible source of advice for handling NRW issues in Lilongwe. The corporation was perceived as "somebody who has felt it, somebody who has practically been there." Employees from NWSC were seen as "a fellow African, somebody who has been there, has been in the mud, and got out" and "a fellow person who is facing similar challenges, unlike somebody who tells you theory on how you can best handle a situation" (interview, LWB manager E, November 2018). According to LWB's NRW manager, the water board would "try to replicate the Ugandan model on how to handle the issues of non-revenue water. This has been a very nice experience and we will strive to take that route too" (quoted in LWB, 2018c, 21).

Inspired by the October 2017 and March 2018 visits to Kampala, LWB initiated an aggressive campaign to crack down on illegal connections, modeled after the Ugandan approach. Reflecting NWSC's advice to involve the media in the fight against illegal connections, the campaign is documented in a series of news articles in the *Nyasa Times* (Table 5.5).

Table 5.5. *Nyasa Times* Articles on Illegal Water Connections (2017-2019)

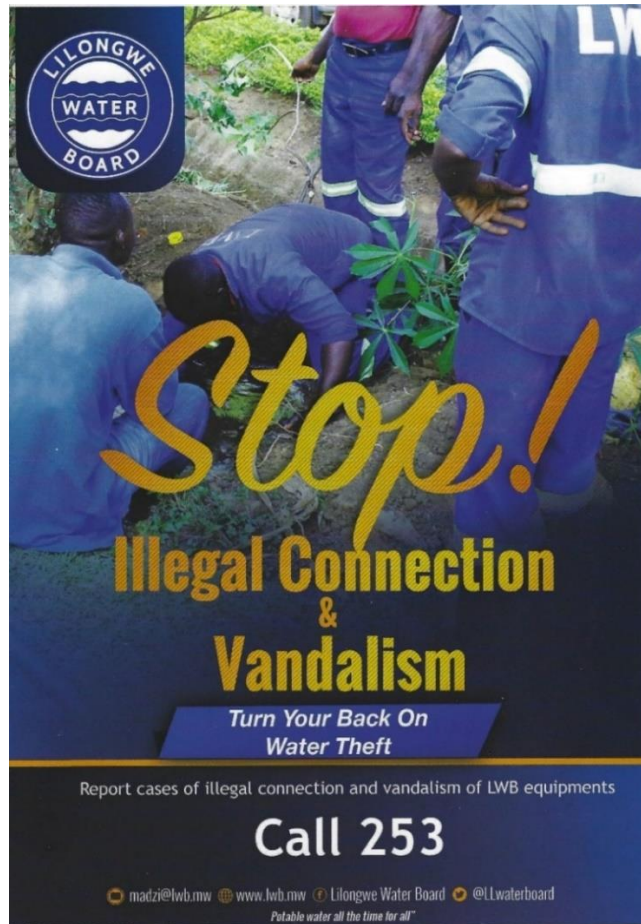
Title	Date published
“MCP in Illegal Water Connection, Fined K106 Million”	November 26, 2017
“Lilongwe Water Board Sets Bounty Pay for Reporting Illegal Connections”	December 5, 2017
“Illegal Water Connections Cost LWB K1.4bn; Culprits Arrested”	February 12, 2018
“‘Illegal Water Connection is Theft’: Legal Expert Calls for Stiff Punishment”	March 15, 2018
“Court Convicts Two for Illegal Water Connection”	March 19, 2018
“LL Water Board, Malawi Police Arrest Repeated Illegal Connection Offender: Hanna Sitima”	March 28, 2018
“Court Fines Convicted Water Thief Hanna Sitima”	August 27, 2018
“Lilongwe Water Board Keen to Curb Illegal Water Connections”	February 8, 2019
“Court Convicts and Fines Man on Illegal Water Connection”	September 12, 2019

Source: The articles can be retrieved from <https://www.nyasatimes.com/>.

The campaign started in late 2017, when LWB caught and fined two commercial customers and one institutional customer for illegally connecting to the city’s water supply: a real estate property in Area 9 and a warehouse in Area 6 had to pay a fine of MWK 1.5 million (about USD 2,000) each, while the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), Malawi’s main opposition party, “was slapped with” a (very high) fine of MWK 106 million (about USD 140,000) (*Nyasa Times*, 2017a; see also *Nyasa Times*, 2017b). The water board had people fined and threatened with arrest before, but in December 2017, the fight against illegal connections reached a new level when the board announced that “all discovered cases of illegal connections or water theft shall be treated as criminal acts and shall be prosecuted as such through the relevant law enforcement organs of Government” (quoted in *Nyasa Times*, 2017a).

In early 2018, LWB’s enforcement campaign gathered momentum: “the company has together with Malawi police embarked on [a] campaign to apprehend those involved in ... illegal connections” (*Nyasa Times*, 2018d). As part of this campaign, Lilongwe residents were encouraged to report illegal connections to the water board (see also Figure 5.14). If their tip-offs proved correct and resulted in “the arrest of those involved in illegal connections,” informers would receive a reward of MWK 200,000 to 300,000 (about USD 270 to 400) (*Nyasa Times*, 2018d). Within five months, from October 2017 to February 2018, the water board was able to confirm 54 cases of illegal connections, of which “[f]ive ... were commercial customers, two were institutional and 47 were residential customers” (*Nyasa Times*, 2018a).

Figure 5.14. LWB Ad: Reporting Illegal Connections



Source: LWB (2018c, 26).

While commercial and institutional customers were in the news at the beginning of the campaign, the focus of reporting, much of it based on LWB press releases, shifted entirely to residential cases in the ensuing months. The articles speak of police operations in Areas 8, 24, and 46 (*Nyasa Times*, 2018a) and report that the water board “has registered more cases of illegal water connections in Areas 23, 25, 36 and 49,” arguably due to ongoing “house constructions” in these areas (*Nyasa Times*, 2019b). In line with NWSC’s “naming and shaming” approach, news articles feature full names of “offenders,” and even their

photographs and the names of their home districts or villages in some cases,⁴¹ showing little concern for personal privacy. The following individuals are stigmatized most fully with regard to illegal connections:

Former LWB Plumber, Area 50: A former LWB plumber was arrested in February 2018 and convicted the following month for “operating an illegal water connection ring in Area 50.” He did not pay his fine of MWK 90,000 (about USD 120) and was subsequently sent to Lilongwe’s Maula prison⁴² to serve a 15-month sentence “with hard labour” (*Nyasa Times*, 2018a).

Resident, Area 47: A resident of Area 47 was arrested in February 2018 and charged a sum of MWK 3.5 million (about USD 4,800) by the water board for “connecting water to her premises illegally.” A “repeated water thief,” she was detained once again a month later, in March 2018. In August 2018, a Lilongwe court ordered her to pay MWK 150,000 (about USD 200) or else serve a prison term of “one and a half years ... with hard labour.” She settled the fine but still owes the first charge of MWK 3.5 million (*Nyasa Times*, 2018b).

Resident, Area 36: In September 2019, a Lilongwe court sentenced a resident of Area 36 to a fine of MWK 200,000 (about USD 270) “in default to serve 15 months imprisonment with hard labour.” He had been taken into custody “following investigations by LWB security personnel and Malawi Police Service” and admitted having “connected water on over 20 houses illegally,” pretending to be a water board employee (*Nyasa Times*, 2019a).

Resident, Area 24: In January 2020, an online platform, called *Current Affairs Malawi*, publicized an additional case of water theft and punishment in Lilongwe. According to the article, a resident “by-passed water pipes at Area 24, facilitating illegal water usage in seven houses.” Someone reported him to the water board, and thanks to that “tip,” he was arrested and sentenced to a fine of MWK 225,000 (about USD 300). He settled the fine to avoid having to spend one year in prison. In court, he had reportedly “prayed for leniency saying he is a first offender and has family and business to look after.” But the judge sided with the prosecutor, who had called for “a meaningful sentence against the accused considering that

⁴¹ The home village (Chichewa: *mudzi*) remains an important reference point for Malawians, even for those who have long moved to the city (Englund, 2002). The mentioning of village names can be read as an attempt to extend the stigma of “water theft” beyond an individual to their area of origin.

⁴² Maula prison is located in Area 6. It has a capacity of 800 prisoners, but, as of 2015, was occupied by 2,650 inmates. The situation in the overcrowded facility is alarming in terms of food supply, health, and sanitation (“Ethiopia – South Africa / Malawi: Imprisoned Migrants,” 2015). For a study of prison conditions in Malawi, including Maula, see Ley (2016).

the water utility body is losing a lot of revenue through illegal connections like what the accused did” (Kachingwe, 2020).⁴³

5.6.2.3. Social Equity and Proportionality

Even critical scholars agree that illegal connections present a challenge for water service delivery in Lilongwe, as they strip the water board of financial revenue and result in lower water pressures in the network. Adams (2018b), for instance, refers to a WaterAid report that identifies “rampant illegal water connections as a major cause of water and financial loss to the Lilongwe Water Board” (ibid., 882). Illegal connections “compromise the water pressure of the system, in turn contributing to intermittent water supply” (ibid., 882). When the water board loses revenue, less is available for extending the network to hitherto unconnected places. When water pressure is low, kiosks in marginalized parts of the supply area are the first to experience dry taps, a circumstance forcing residents to store water or rely on unsafe alternatives to meet their needs.

What LWB’s punitive policy ignores, however, is the possibility “that desperation, not just a desire to avoid payment” (Felbab-Brown, 2017, 21) leads water users to resort to unauthorized consumption, and that “a tolerance of illegal connections ... could constitute a progressive subsidy” (Bayliss, 2003, 521) in a city of great inequalities. Acquiring a formal household connection is unaffordable for most of Lilongwe’s low-income residents due to the high connection fees involved.⁴⁴ With individual connections out of reach, the urban poor are left dependent on expensive and unreliable kiosks as the only legal means of accessing water from the utility. Blind to the structural causes of illegal connections, LWB’s approach, copied from Uganda, does not distinguish between “survival versus enrichment beyond survival,” and does not sufficiently consider different gradients of water theft, or “the scale of the violation, such as the difference between an individual taking water for his or her household drinking needs, versus an industry illegally avoiding payment for water on a massive scale” (Felbab-Brown, 2017, 21).

Instead of prosecuting “[w]ealthy businesses engaged in systematic and large-scale water theft” (Felbab-Brown, 2017, 47), LWB seems to have centered its efforts on some of the poorest parts of Lilongwe, such as Areas 8, 23, 24, 36, 46, and 50. Public services in these areas, including water provision, are oftentimes

⁴³ LWB estimates that illegal connections result in monthly revenue losses of MWK 120 million (about USD 160,000) (LWB, 2018c, 24).

⁴⁴ According to Tiwale (2019, 172), a formal household connection can cost between USD 100 and 120 in Lilongwe’s poor and marginalized areas. In these areas, the network tends to be underdeveloped, which makes tertiary network extensions particularly expensive.

inadequate, and many residents are unemployed or work in the informal sector in order to make a living.⁴⁵ The acts of individuals who might have earned a bit of extra cash by connecting some houses to the water system illegally are portrayed as a form of organized crime (“operating an illegal water connection ring”) deserving of harsh punishment (“imprisonment with hard labour”). The spatial focus of the campaign, coupled with the severe penalties imposed, raises serious questions about social equity and proportionality in the water board’s crusade against illegal connections.

5.7. Conclusion

The collaboration between LWB and VEI started as a service contract (2009-2014) and subsequently turned into a WOP (2015-2019). Both arrangements proved similarly ineffective in reducing NRW levels in Lilongwe, suggesting that neither PPPs nor WOPs are a guarantee for successful performance improvement.

Evidence from Lilongwe indicates that PPPs can generate a sense of passivity, a mentality that is difficult to counteract after decades of private-sector promotion in the global South. Service contracts and consultancies are what utilities like LWB are accustomed to: “I think from previous experiences, or the way we are used to, we are just engaging consultants, they work on the things, and then hand over the deliverables” (interview, LWB manager C, November 2018). The water board played along with the change in partnership arrangement in 2015, but the shift to the WOP, which demanded “joint effort” from both sides, was championed more by VEI than by LWB. While VEI tried to move away from the private-sector arrangement, LWB would have preferred to hold on to the service contract to keep VEI at some distance, and perhaps also to avoid taking direct responsibility for the complex and politically unpopular issue of NRW reduction.

The WOP never fully emancipated itself from the previous service contract. Crucially, it retained the elements of performance-based compensation and KPIs as metrics for success. The resulting pressure caused relational damage between the partners, a loss of focus, and a narrow “tunnel vision” on the part of VEI. The Dutch team increasingly lost touch with its Malawian counterparts and became dismissive of, or uninterested in, alternative ideas. LWB staff, for its part, quietly distanced itself from the partnership or subverted it with inaction. From LWB’s perspective, the requirements of the EIB seemed more important

⁴⁵ The unemployment rate of Lilongwe City was 16 percent in 2008 (UN-Habitat, 2011, 8) and 15 percent in 2018 (Government of Malawi, 2019, 110: Table D2). Surveys indicate that unemployment in the informal settlements could be as high as 45 percent (Adams, 2018a, 37).

to VEI than the actual partnership, to the extent that the water board felt sidelined and ignored when it should have played a leading role.

The partnership between LWB and VEI is an extreme case of performance orientation and donor influence in WOPs, as capacity building was explicitly tied to financial compensation. In spite of its unusual characteristics, the case holds lessons, or perhaps another note of caution (cf. Pascual Sanz et al., 2013), for VEI in its drive to “professionalize” its partnerships abroad: the use of performance targets and KPIs aligns well with calls from the international donor community to find ways of quantitatively “proving” the effectiveness of WOPs. The more “business-like” and “results-oriented” VEI presents itself, the more favor it may gain with domestic and international donors. But when performance metrics and an allure of professionalism override the need for balance, flexibility, and patience in WOPs, VEI’s partnerships risk operating in vacuum spaces that are cut off from local realities on the ground.

Aside from VEI, LWB was involved in a partnership with NWSC to better address commercial losses. NWSC is conscious of the powers and benefits associated with its mentor status. Contrary to claims of horizontality and equality in South-South cooperation, the corporation conducts its partnerships in a rather condescending and top-down fashion. To protect its reputation on the continent and internationally, NWSC insists on playing the mentor role in WOPs with other utilities in Africa, even in cases where its performance would justify a more equal (peer-to-peer) footing. While the corporation does “pick lessons” from its mentees too, it does so informally and not in any official learning capacity.

LWB noticed discrepancies between NWSC’s reputation and its actual performance, but the team from Lilongwe still accepted the corporation as a credible mentor. LWB staff eagerly adopted the Ugandan approach to illegal connections, including policing and punishment in low-income areas. Both LWB and NWSC are corporatized utilities that operate based on NPM principles. Both are also public utilities by ownership, but rather than promoting public values, their partnership seems to have further entrenched a service delivery model that puts cost recovery and financial viability above access, affordability, and participation.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion: Water, Public Alternatives, and Postneoliberalism

The concept of WOPs first appeared in the Hashimoto Action Plan in 2006. Since then, WOPs have evolved from a high-level idea into a robust practice, supported by a global multi-stakeholder alliance and regional and national platforms. In *Alternatives to Privatization*, McDonald and Ruiters (2012a) still treated WOPs as something of a sidenote; however, since the early 2010s, attention to WOPs has increased and the literature keeps growing in the form of both policy-oriented case studies (see Chapter 2, Table 2.5) and academic journal articles (e.g., Beck, 2019; Carolini et al., 2018; Coppel and Schwartz, 2011; Pascual Sanz et al., 2013; Tutusaus and Schwartz, 2016; Wright-Contreras et al., 2020).

As discussed in this dissertation, WOPs are a unique partnership type in the water sector that differs, by design, from both PPPs and PUPs. In contrast to PPPs, WOPs are supposed to take place on a not-for-profit basis and require input, commitment, and active participation from both partners. The idea is not to replace public-sector workers with private managers or consultants but to build their capacity through peer-to-peer advice, so that public utilities can “provide a better service to more people, especially the poor” (GWOPA, 2013, 10). WOPs tend to be less expensive than PPPs and have the potential to lead to more sustainable results due to their focus on capacity development, rather than capacity substitution, at the local level. In contrast to PUPs, WOPs allow for the participation of private operators, under the condition that they refrain from commercial activities related to the partnerships.

The inclusion of the private sector was hotly contested in the early days of GWOPA. The presence of private operators on the SC, and their possible involvement in actual partnerships, led to a feeling within the public water movement that the young initiative had been corrupted from the start and could no longer be taken seriously as an alternative to PPPs. This sense of disappointment is what lay behind critical voices, such as Boag and McDonald’s (2010) article mentioned in Chapter 1. When I discussed this article with David McDonald in a phone conversation in 2019, he told me that he had gotten quite “a bit of heat” from some of his colleagues, who felt that GWOPA, even though imperfect, was one of the “very few positive things going on around here” and therefore deserved to be treated “more favorably” than he had done in his article.

One of these groups of colleagues were pro-public activists from civil society and trade unions, who decided to give the initiative a chance, and some became involved, quite passionately, through open letters and on the SC. With the GWOPA Secretariat lacking in courage and assertiveness (for fear of alienating

mainstream actors), it fell upon civil society and trade unions to press for a “quarantine mechanism” and a strong mandate to enforce the integrity of WOPs. The ISC is what has resulted from these efforts. The ISC lacks serious investigative and enforcement powers but, in the case of *Sénégalaise des Eaux* and REGIDESO, has shown some effectiveness in calling out private companies’ possible misconduct. Real consequences are yet to follow from the ISC’s recommendations on the case. Now that GWOPA’s situation has stabilized, civil society members expect that the discussion of a “quarantine clause” will be revived in 2020 (interview, civil society representatives C and D, December 2019).

The formal inclusion of the private sector is the most visible way in which WOPs fall short of the “alternatives to privatization” ideal, which explicitly “excludes all forms of private, for-profit actors” (McDonald and Ruiters, 2012c, 3). As discussed in Chapter 4, however, it turns out that the private sector has been much less involved than initially expected, with only a handful of private water companies engaging in WOPs on a regular or systematic basis. Representatives from AquaFed (the International Federation of Private Water Operators) have attended SC meetings and have taken part in shaping the direction of GWOPA, but their behavior has been described by other stakeholders as fairly quiet. As one civil society representative put it, private water companies wanted to have a seat on the SC, not necessarily because they wanted to destroy the initiative but because they wanted to have some say in, and a measure of control over, what was happening in GWOPA:

The truth is that they [private operators] have not been really well involved.... They are not really involved doing anything. But they need to be there just to control that [some things are] not happening.... [and] to prevent [GWOPA from being] a counterpower to them. This is a place where we talk about water, we do things related to water, so they want to be there just to keep an eye [on it] and to see that this is not a lobby against them. (interview, civil society representative D, December 2019)

My case studies of VEI and NWSC underscore the need to refocus the debate on WOPs, beyond the private sector and towards public water and sanitation operators, especially those that are publicly owned but operate as quasi-private entities. VEI and NWSC engage in WOPs not out of solidarity but because the partnerships serve some strategic goals and purposes. Staff members who travel abroad can learn new skills and build their professional portfolios. The prospect of international travel can help increase the attractiveness of the water sector in the eyes of young professionals and highly-qualified staff. Further, even if the actual partnerships take place on a not-for-profit basis, they can still help unlock new opportunities for trade, investment, and for-profit consulting. Managers within VEI and NWSC have understood the benefits that WOPs can bring to their organizations. They are willing to send staff abroad to help other utilities, knowing that their staff, and their organizations, will also benefit in return. Clearly, benefits like staff development and improvements in corporate image can attract more utilities to

participate in WOPs as mentors. When more mentors are willing to participate, more partnerships can be formed and more assistance can be offered to those struggling. However, evidence from Lilongwe makes it clear that the practices of VEI and NWSC also give cause for concern. Two trends in particular deserve greater attention: professionalization and corporatization.

Professionalization: The implementation of the WaterWorX program began only recently, in 2018 and 2019. Therefore, the impact of the Dutch aid, trade, and investment agenda is not yet examined in detail in this dissertation. My findings nevertheless point to the risks and challenges associated with an increasing “professionalization” of WOPs. To improve its own fundraising appeal and attract private investment into the water sector, VEI has adopted an approach that imitates private-sector principles and practices. For VEI, WOPs are supposed to be structured and results-oriented. More specifically, the partnerships are supposed to lead to improvements in operational and financial efficiency, and these improvements should be clearly measurable by KPIs. VEI’s involvement in Lilongwe highlights the problematic implications that such a “professionalized” approach can have for learning and capacity development. An obsession with NRW reduction, exacerbated by the promise of monetary rewards, led to a deterioration in relationships and the Dutch team’s isolation in Lilongwe. One-sidedness in staff exchange and VEI’s cynical views on return visits led to a further withdrawal of local counterparts, some of whom would have preferred to keep the previous PPP arrangement to retain some autonomy in taking or leaving VEI’s advice. The WOP proved ineffective in reducing water losses (as had the preceding service contract), and so the mentee utility increasingly turned to other sources of advice to deal with the politicized issue of NRW reduction.

If VEI wants its partnerships to be more than self-serving activities, resident and short-term staff should be allowed to relax rigidity and be given more leeway to adjust partnership goals and expectations to context-specific conditions, taking local experiences into account. The need for alternative frameworks that foreground intangible results and social indicators has been repeatedly emphasized (e.g., Dumontier et al., 2016; McDonald, 2016a; Pascual Sanz et al., 2013; Spronk, 2010), but the case of VEI suggests that such frameworks have not been widely adopted. As VEI’s international standing increases, so does its leverage with partners and donors. Instead of mimicking business-style practices, VEI could break new ground and forge ahead with alternative ways of measuring performance and capacity development in the water sector. In this role as a pioneer, VEI could also let go of North-South “partnerships” that smack of neocolonialism and instead give greater support to South-South and triangular cooperation, as has recently been tried in Mozambique and Angola (GWOPA, 2018b). As evidence from Lilongwe suggests, the knowledge shared between Southern partners does appear to travel more easily across cultures and contexts.

Corporatization: Yet, as corporatization becomes increasingly widespread among public water utilities in the global South, there is a greater need to move beyond questions of South-South compatibility. What should come into sharper relief is the *substance* or *content* of the knowledge circulated through WOPs. NWSC is a state-owned utility from the global South, but the advice it shared with counterparts from Malawi – uproot “illegal” connections, including in low-income areas, and harshly punish the “offenders” – is anything but postneoliberal and every bit as regressive as the advice the World Bank and private water multinationals might have given back in the 1990s. This is not to suggest that all WOPs work against progressive or “pro-poor” approaches to water service delivery, but it does highlight the possibility that WOPs could serve as “conduits” or “transmitting devices” for neoliberal policies in the sector. Apart from NWSC, several other corporatized water operators have served as mentors in WOPs. Burkina Faso’s ONEA (Baron, 2014), Colombia’s EPM (Furlong, 2015; Furlong et al., 2018), and South Africa’s Rand Water (van Rooyen and Hall, 2007) are just a few of the examples worth further research.

With the help of mentors like NWSC and ONEA, and thanks to financial assistance from donors like OFID and JICA, the number of WOPs between African utilities has steadily grown. However, local utility staff appears to remain conflicted about African-to-African partnerships. Staff in Lilongwe emphasized the benefits of “learning from a fellow African,” praising elements of mutual understanding and shared political context that are present in such partnerships. At the same time, staff suggested that partnerships with European operators were still needed, so that the utility could “learn from the best” (interview, LWB manager E, November 2018). The “best” knowledge and expertise, in this interpretation, still comes from the global North, rather than from Africa, despite the many challenges experienced in the partnership with the Dutch. Apart from perceived hierarchies of European and African knowledge, the case of NWSC’s failed involvement in Ghana, discussed in Chapter 4, suggests that there are also perceived hierarchies of knowledge and status *within* Africa, with Ghana on par with Nigeria but superior to Uganda, and Uganda, perhaps, superior to Malawi. Additional research is needed to understand these perceptions and the ways in which they affect the formation and workings of knowledge networks in Africa.

Although there was a decline, or a shift, in private-sector participation around the mid-2000s (see Chapter 1), there are now signs that PPPs have experienced an upsurge in recent years, challenging the notion of a “postneoliberal moment.” In this current wave of PPP promotion, donors emphasize the financial benefits that partnerships with the private sector can supposedly bring, arguing that private-sector financing or “blended” approaches are the solution for urgently needed infrastructure development in the global South (Bayliss and van Waeyenberge, 2018). In light of this emphasis on infrastructure finance, it is important to point out that WOPs cannot replace concessions, BOT projects, and divestitures in terms of promised capital investments, and as such do not present an alternative to these “deeper” forms of private-sector

involvement. Yet, compared with service and management contracts and private-sector consultancies, WOPs offer a number of advantages, first and foremost a focus on capacity building rather than capacity substitution. It is clear that building organizational capacity in the global South is still a challenge, especially when it comes to translating knowledge gains into service improvements. However, my findings suggest that the adoption of alternative evaluation frameworks, coupled with increased support for South-South and triangular cooperation, could bring about more effective capacity-development partnerships with more sustainable outcomes.

The literature on “alternatives to privatization” and the literature on postneoliberal water governance are both concerned with social equity and participation in water management and water service provision. Despite their shared concerns, both strands of research have, for the most part, evolved separately. Researchers affiliated with the Municipal Services Project have advanced the “alternatives” literature (McDonald and Ruiters, 2012a), while researchers affiliated with the Program on Water Governance at the University of British Columbia have advanced the literature on postneoliberal water governance, with a focus on Latin America (Bakker, 2013; Harris and Roa-García, 2013; Marston, 2015; Yates and Bakker, 2014). One of the contributions of this dissertation has been to bring both sets of literature into dialogue to understand the origins and nature of WOPs as a partnership type. Future research could extend this dialogue, combining the scholar-activist approach of the “alternatives” literature with the theoretical insights of postneoliberal scholarship. Such research could bring to light “the continuities and discontinuities of neoliberalism” (Brand, 2016, 584) in the water sector, not only in Latin America but in other world regions as well.

APPENDIX I

Municipal Services Project: Partners

Africa Water Network

African Centre on Citizenship and Democracy

Centro de Estudios Superiores Universitarios

Focus on the Global South

People's Health Movement

Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU)

Queen's University

Red Vida

Regional Network on Equity in Health in Eastern and Southern Africa

School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)

Transnational Institute (TNI)

University of Ottawa School of International Development and Global Studies

Source: Municipal Services Project (n.d.).

APPENDIX II

Interviews

In-Person Interviews

1. VEI regional manager A, June 12, 2018
2. Waternet manager for strategic alliances and partnerships, June 28, 2018
3. SIAAP project manager – international, July 18, 2018
4. Nkana Water and Sewerage Company managing director, August 29, 2018
5. GWOPA officer in charge, September 13, 2018
6. GWOPA program management officer A, September 13, 2018
7. GWOPA program management officer B, September 14, 2018
8. Former NWSC managing director, October 4, 2018
9. Hamburg Wasser head of urban infrastructure coordination and hydrology and Hamburg Wasser senior expert water and sanitation, October 24, 2018
10. VEI RPM Lilongwe, November 5 and November 26, 2018
11. VEI NRW expert, November 8, 2018
12. Former VEI RPM Lilongwe, November 9, 2018
13. LWB manager A, November 12, 2018
14. LWB director of technical services, November 13, 2018
15. LWB manager B, November 13, 2018
16. LWB manager C, November 13, 2018
17. VEI RPM Lilongwe and WML short-term expert (commercial losses), November 13, 2018
18. LWB manager D, November 16, 2018
19. LWB manager E, November 19, 2018
20. LWB kiosk manager, November 19, 2018
21. LWB manager F, November 20, 2018
22. VEI regional manager B, November 20, 2018
23. LWB CEO, November 20, 2018
24. LWB data analyst, November 23, 2018
25. LWB director of finance, November 27, 2018

26. LWB engineer, November 27, 2018
27. LWB manager G, November 27, 2018
28. LWB technical assistant, November 29, 2018
29. SWDE international projects manager, December 10, 2018
30. Dunea program manager international cooperation, January 14, 2019
31. Aqua Publica Europea executive director, January 16, 2019
32. GIZ program manager, January 24, 2019
33. Former VEI RPM in Asia, April 4, 2019
34. Former eThekwini Water and Sanitation CEO, June 5 and June 10, 2019
35. eThekwini Water and Sanitation senior manager planning, June 20, 2019
36. eThekwini Water and Sanitation senior engineer, June 21, 2019
37. eThekwini Water and Sanitation strategic executive, July 10, 2019
38. eThekwini Water and Sanitation planning engineer, July 17, 2019
39. Former WML CEO, August 5, 2019
40. Former Brabant Water international projects manager, August 6, 2019
41. Former UN-Habitat official, August 7, 2019
42. Waterbedrijf Groningen CEO, August 7, 2019
43. VEI CEO, August 8, 2019
44. Private-sector representative, August 26, 2019
45. UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, August 28, 2019
46. WML short-term expert (physical losses), November 13, 2019
47. PWN project manager, November 18, 2019
48. Former VEI manager, November 19, 2019
49. Civil society representatives C and D, December 13, 2019
50. Oasen international program coordinator, January 21, 2020

Phone/Skype Interviews

1. Former GWOPA research consultant, July 2, 2018
2. Trade union representative, July 13 and July 27, 2018, March 12, 2019
3. VEI project manager Mozambique, July 24, 2018
4. Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs senior policy officer WASH, September 28, 2018

5. Civil society representative A, October 8, 2018
6. Maynilad head of NRW services, October 29, 2018
7. Maynilad Water Academy executive director, January 8, 2019
8. Researcher A, January 10, 2019
9. Former GWOPA program manager, January 11, 2019
10. UNICEF Angola chief of WASH, February 1, 2019
11. Researcher B, February 14, 2019
12. VEI RPM in Africa, March 11, 2019
13. Contra Costa Water District general manager, March 13, 2019
14. NWSC director, March 25, 2019
15. NWSC manager, April 10, 2019
16. IDB lead water and sanitation specialist, April 10, 2019
17. WOP-LAC coordinator, April 12, 2019
18. World Bank lead water and sanitation specialist, April 15, 2019
19. San Francisco Public Utilities Commission director of water resources, April 19, 2019
20. Researcher C, May 1, 2019
21. ADB lead facilitator for WOPs, May 2, 2019
22. Cari-WOP coordinator, May 7, 2019
23. Civil society representative B, July 9, 2019
24. Consultant WOPs Finland, September 20, 2019
25. Vitens short-term expert, November 22, 2019
26. Consultant WaterWorX mid-term review, February 7, 2020

APPENDIX III

GWOPA Guiding Principles

A	Inclusiveness	GWOPA shall be as inclusive as possible and reach out to all stakeholders in the water supply and sanitation sector including public and private water operators, nongovernmental organizations and representatives of civil society, academia, and private sector players at the global, regional, and national levels.
B	Non-profit based partnerships	Partnerships established between water operators under the WOPs umbrella shall be built on a not-for-profit basis. Therefore, funding of partnerships – mainly done in the format of “twinning” of utilities – should cover direct costs only without profit of any sort for any participating party.
C	Mutuality of benefit	Mutuality of benefit shall be promoted whenever possible in implementing “twinning” and other activities of exchange of experience and expertise among utilities. Such mutuality shall be used as an incentive, whenever possible, for utility cooperation on [a] non-profit basis.
D	Transparency	GWOPA shall promote transparency in the water and sanitation sector on the global, regional, and national levels. The Alliance shall conduct its own activities in a transparent manner, providing clear and regular updates on activities, and equal opportunities for stakeholders to influence Alliance direction.
E	Learning from the past and others	GWOPA shall draw lessons and learn from past experiences to promote best practices for utility partnerships and capacity building.
F	Supporting WOPs processes worldwide	GWOPA shall not seek to recreate, but to reinforce, efforts worldwide to strengthen mutual exchange between water operators. In this sense, the Global WOPs Alliance supports all regional and global initiatives that champion WOPs activities and principles.
G	Fostering sustainable change	GWOPA shall support efforts to build lasting positive change within water utilities using mechanisms that are increasingly independent of external financial support.
H	Building a culture of solidarity	GWOPA shall embrace and promote a spirit of solidarity and mutual support between water operators and all other water sector actors working towards the goals of the Alliance.

Source: GWOPA (2012).

APPENDIX IV

GWOPA Code of Conduct

1	Good governance	All stakeholders will take all needed measures to conduct their activities within the partnership according to the principles of good governance, including: Transparency; Accountability; Responsiveness to stakeholders' concerns and interests; Consensus-orientation; Clarity and common understanding of stakeholders' roles, rights, responsibilities, and expectations; Compliance with local laws; Integrity.
2	Integrity	Central to WOPs is the sharing of knowledge in a not-for-profit and unrestrained way and built upon the notion of solidarity between utilities. [Their] purpose is to enhance the capacity and capability of public utilities within the guiding principle of integrity. Therefore: The partners agree that no information will be intentionally withheld by any party in anticipation of any commercial gains, and no confidential information of one party will be used by the other party for its commercial advantage.
3	Social and cultural values	All stakeholders will take needed measures to abide by and respect the social and cultural values of the location where they are engaging in WOPs, including: Respecting the cultural norms and behaviours relevant to the local context; Recognising and respecting the influence of gender, age, culture and religion on the different perspectives and values accorded to water and sanitation.
4	Resolution of conflicts	All stakeholders will form partnerships based on mutual trust and respect, address all issues with full transparency, and collaborate to identify workable solutions.
5	Results-orientation	Prior to engagement, partners shall prepare written partnership agreements that outline: a) the objectives of the partnership and expected outputs; b) the roles and responsibilities of each partner; c) the value (in-kind and cash) of the partnership; and d) the interests of each party in engaging in [the] partnership. The agreement should form the basis for professional, results-oriented cooperation, while leaving sufficient room for flexible solutions, as the context and issues are subject to change and evolve.
6	Cost sharing and not-for-profit	Activities carried out by any partner or stakeholder within a WOP shall be done on a not-for-profit basis. WOPs should never be used as a vehicle for commercial activities by any party. Activities within a WOP will

		incur costs for both partners. The parties have to identify these costs and decide together whether to bear these costs themselves, appeal for external support, or both. The respective contributions of the parties, be they in-cash or in-kind, shall be mutually agreed by the parties themselves.
7	Shared incentives	Particular objectives and common interests of all stakeholders will be openly discussed to identify all possible costs and benefits in the arrangement. The respective motivations of both parties shall be explicitly discussed. WOPs' benefits are mutual, but not necessarily equal. Partners have to respect the bona fide interests of their counterparts and seek actions that advance the goals of the partnership without requiring compromise of a partner's key interests.

Source: GWOPA (2012).

APPENDIX V

Malawi: Select Development Indicators

	1964	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2017
Population, total (millions)	4.03	4.70	6.25	9.40	11.15	14.54	17.67
Urban population (% of total population)	4.8	6.1	9.1	11.6	14.6	15.5	16.7
Population growth (annual %)	2.5	2.6	2.8	3.6	2.7	2.9	2.7
Life expectancy at birth, total (years)	37.7	39.8	44.3	46.1	45.1	55.6	63.3
Mortality rate, under-5 (per 1,000 live births)	n/a	341.7	253.2	238.7	173.0	88.4	52.7
Prevalence of HIV, total (% of population ages 15-49)	n/a	n/a	n/a	8.1	14.4	10.6	9.4
Literacy rate, adult total (% of people ages 15 and above)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	61.3	n/a
Individuals using the Internet (% of population)	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.0	0.1	2.3	13.8
GDP (current US\$) (billions)	0.19	0.29	1.24	1.88	1.74	6.96	6.30

Source: The World Bank – World Development Indicators, retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/country/malawi>.

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