



International
Water Association

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The Global WOPs Alliance



Water Operators Partnerships

Building WOPs for Sustainable Development in Water and Sanitation



Developed in coordination with:



BUILDING WATER OPERATORS PARTNERSHIPS

The Challenge

Water operators worldwide are in need of assistance and capacity building support to sharpen service delivery. Experienced water operators, professional water associations, national water ministries, development agencies and international finance institutions have a privileged position in assisting them. Partnerships between operators have emerged as a feasible way to improve their own efficiency and effectiveness.

The common objective from partnership building between water operators is to accelerate the process of water and sanitation services improvement, thereby helping to reach the Millennium Development Goals related to these services. Only by joint, coordinated and strong action can the parties achieve these improvements.

The purpose of this publication is to provide information on the functioning of Water Operators Partnerships and to highlight the opportunities and preconditions behind this approach. The actions required by water operators and the financial and practical support necessary from other parties are illustrated through a series of practical examples.

A distinctive characteristic of the WOPs mechanism compared to some other forms of external support is that the 'mentor' operator (the organization with demonstrable experience and expertise) does not take over the driver's seat of the 'recipient' operator, but assumes a coaching role in the partnership. Thus, the added value of the WOPs approach is in enabling the operator itself to sustain an improvement over the longer term.

This document aims to share experience in the development of current WOPs and to help motivate interest across a wider set of actors in adopting partnership approaches.

Disclaimer: This publication includes data and analysis that were valid at the time of writing. As WOPs develop, new ideas and partnership arrangements may emerge. Updated information will be disseminated via relevant web pages, in newsletters and by other means.

This publication does not constitute legal advice; it provides some practical recommendations on best practice for establishing and implementing WOPs.

This publication has been prepared by the International Water Association and the Global WOPs Alliance secretariat at UN-HABITAT, together with Vitens-Evides International, The Netherlands, and associations and contact persons in the Asian, African, Arab and Latin American regions. This document draws on examples provided by USAID, USAID/ECO-Asia, Asian Development Bank, WaterLinks, Inter-American Development Bank, AIDIS, AfWA, IWA-ESAR, SAAWU, NWSC and ACWUA. All are gratefully acknowledged.



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Executive summary

Experienced water operators, donors, financiers and water authorities are challenged to assist the thousands of public water operators that are in urgent need of improving their services. Partnerships between operators present a way to improve and extend basic water and sanitation services to all consumers.

A WOP is defined as any form of simple or structured partnership aimed at capacity building on a not-for-profit basis. Partnerships can take a multitude of different forms and have various technical, legal and social dimensions depending on individual circumstances.

Identified by the United Nations Secretary General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation (UNSGAB) as a critical step for improving access to water for the world's poorest, the WOPs initiative is led by the Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance – an international network of concerned partners hosted by UN-HABITAT.

All relevant stakeholders are invited to participate in WOPs using the information presented in this review: which includes



experience related to characteristics of successful WOPs, financing models, and a WOPs classification illustrated with specific examples. There are several fundamental advantages behind operator partnerships as an approach:

1. **WOPs are the right fit**
2. **WOPs give value for money**
3. **WOPs provide inspirational support**
4. **WOPs focus on public utilities and are pro-poor**
5. **WOPs offer anchoring capacity**
6. **WOPs help catalyse reform**

A WOP can typically start with a simple collaboration where the partners learn about each other and find common ground for continued joint activities. Such collaboration can over time develop into a full fledged partnership between two or more focused and engaged partners.

At the regional level, professional water associations and development banks are working with specific WOPs programmes. These programmes, and their supporting networks, are highlighted; ongoing WOPs are listed region by region, contact details for local WOPs secretariats, programme coordinators and financiers is provided.

This review further systematically collects and analyzes experience on existing operator's partnerships, providing advice on best practices, partnering preconditions and financing models.

Compared to the huge investments in the water and sanitation sector, WOPs are relatively cheap, while they may substantially extend the service life of infrastructure and increase efficiency of water operators.

1 Why use partnership approaches for capacity building of public water operators?

1.1 Business as usual is not enough

Today, almost 1 billion people live without access to improved drinking water sources and 2.5 billion lack access to improved sanitation. In order to reach Millennium Development Goal 7 (MDG7), access to sanitation has to be given to at least 1.5 billion and a safe water supply to 500 million before 2015.¹ Although the situation is better for water supply than for sanitation, the business as usual scenario will be insufficient in achieving these targets.

Although each case differs in its complexity, common problems cut across many public water operators and municipal service providers, such as poor strategic management, weak financial and operational management, low funding priority, lack of a sound human resources policy, poor staff skills, absent or weak customer service orientation, political interference, and little or no independent regulation or oversight.

In the 1980s and 1990s, high expectations were raised by the involvement of the private sector in the provision of water and sanitation services. However, as it became clear that this involvement would not be enough to reach the MDG7 the WOPs was introduced as a useful mechanism for providing support for capacity building of public water operators and thereby help improve services to all consumers at a broader scale and at a higher speed.

As over 90% of the world's water operators are public the role of public operators can not be denied. Several public operators have undergone substantial improvements in performance in partnership with others. They highlight the potential of public operators themselves to break the vicious cycle of performance decline.

1.2 The potential of WOPs multiplier effect

Although partnerships between water operators have existed for decades, the WOPs initiative provides a major and systematic approach to face the challenge of the water and sanitation sector, based on a mutual support approach between water operators and the belief that a well performing operator can act as template for other public operators to improve their performance.

Peer support has been the catalyst for transforming water operators from underperformers to champions. Many such operators, having received partner assistance, are then able to pass on their new knowledge to other partners, thereby generating a strong multiplier effect.

Mentoring and receiving operators may have different motives to enter into a WOP (see section 2.2) but there are at least six fundamental advantages to joining the WOPs initiative:

1. **The right fit – WOPs are demand driven and tailor-made to meet the specific needs of the partners**
2. **Value for money – WOPs are an effective way of building know-how where and when needed**
3. **Inspirational support – WOPs help provide the inspiration to perform better**
4. **Public utilities and pro-poor – WOPs focus clearly on support between operators on a not-for-profit basis, rooted in a culture of solidarity**
5. **Anchoring capacity – WOPs aim to develop the resident human resource capacity within an operator, highlighting the key role that workers, as well as managers, play in the delivery of safe and accessible water and sanitation services**
6. **WOPs as a catalyst for reform – Improving services to the poor requires political commitment, financial support and a sound institutional network. WOPs may help catalyze further improvements and build the momentum for upstream reforms.**

¹ Data from UN 2009 report on the MDGs

A WOP can be defined as any form of simple or structured partnership between two (or more) water operators that:

- **provides professional support for capacity building based on mutual trust,**
- **is based on not-for-profit principles (though costs should be recovered, partly or in full; see section 2.2),**
- **is results-oriented according to agreed terms, and**
- **is based on good governance principles (integrity, transparency and accountability).**

2 Characteristics of WOPs

2.1 Capacity building at the core of a WOP

In basic terms, water operators all manage the same processes, with degrees of complexity under varying working environments. Effective management requires human resources with the right skills and incentives to push for improvement. To sustain the benefits of demand driven capacity building programmes, these must be tailored to the operators specific needs. The gradual development of a partnership under the WOPs umbrella allows for step-by-step extension of capacity and may eventually lead to a total overhaul of the recipient operator's organization and operations.

Additionally, staffs need a suitable enabling environment and the right incentive structure to apply what they have learned. Only by applying sound human resource management can the operators expect to benefit fully from the resources invested in capacity building.

2.2 WOPs are not-for-profit partnerships

A WOP is based on mutual support and all activities involved by the partnership, whatever form it takes, should be carried out on a not-for-profit basis. However, the activities associated with WOPs will incur costs for both parties. The parties have to identify these costs and agree on their respective allocation. They should decide together either to bear these costs themselves, or to appeal for external support, or both.

The respective contributions can be in cash or in-kind, as partners are expected to contribute their skills, expertise and time; however, the nature of the contribution will depend on a range of factors including different models applied by the various financiers. Some financiers are only funding travel and accommodation costs while the time input by both mentor and recipient is provided by the operators themselves.

Though the majority of water operators (controlled by governments) are publicly owned and operated, all operators with knowledge to share, including private operators, are encouraged to be engaged in WOPs.

The main driver for water operators to share their experience and knowledge is to challenge their professional experts, to build their corporate image, or to create incentives for their human resources strategies. Others enter WOPs arrangements as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility policy. Furthermore, in South-South exchanges some operators that have benefited from partnerships in the past feel committed to share their newly gained know-how and skills with other operators in an act of solidarity; thus giving rise to a cascading effect. It should also be noted that customers in some European countries are willing to pay a few per cent extra for their water services to support WOPs in other countries

The coexistence of diverse approaches opens up to a broader spectrum of alternatives, with more actors involved in pushing for performance improvements. This is likely to speed up the overall performance improvements and fulfilment of the MDGs.

2.3 Pre-conditions for successful WOPs

Based on experience from the implementation of a variety of WOPs there are several basic requirements to be met to achieve success. These include:

1. **a demand driven approach – the recipient operator has to clearly express demand for a WOP and spell out their need for a partnership.**
2. **a willing and enabling environment –**

frequently a partnership will give rise to suggestions for change, either in the operational process or in the governance model used (e.g. trying to create more autonomy for water operators). If there is no mandate for implementing change, this will frustrate operators engaged in the partnership.

- 3. formulate and agree on clearly defined and specified targets to guide the partnership and to keep it on track**
- 4. incorporate flexibility in order to adjust partnership activities to the needs and demands of the recipient operator**
- 5. agree to open communications, a common language, and transparent financial systems as base conditions for a trustworthy partnership relationship**

Before stepping into a comprehensive partnership, an initial period of up to 12 months, where operators get to know each other better and assess the conditions for a longer lasting commitment to each other, might be useful.

2.4 Strengthening capacity without taking over

One of the distinctive characteristics of WOPs compared to some other forms of external support is that the mentor does not take over the 'driver's seat' of the recipient operator. No (temporary) management is installed; rather the mentor assumes a coaching role, assisting the recipient. The main objective of this approach is to strengthen the capacity of existing local human resources to such an extent as to improve the overall performance of the water operator.

It is important to remark that strengthening the capacity of human resources, generating behavioral changes and sustainable achievements within an organization requires time. Therefore, achieving performance improvements in WOPs might take longer than in other partnership approaches where the management is delegated to another party. However, WOPs added value relies in enabling the operator itself to sustain improvements over the long term; ensuring interventions introduced are better institutionalized within the operator.

2.5 Funding of WOPs

The sources of WOPs funding are diverse: international financial institutions, governmental development agencies, mentoring operators, recipient operators, donations from civil society and others. Given the diversity of partnership arrangements, it is difficult to specify the budget that a typical WOP requires. However, rough estimates indicate that simple partnership projects could cost from 5,000 to 50,000 Euros per year, while a comprehensive and structured partnership could cost tenfold more².

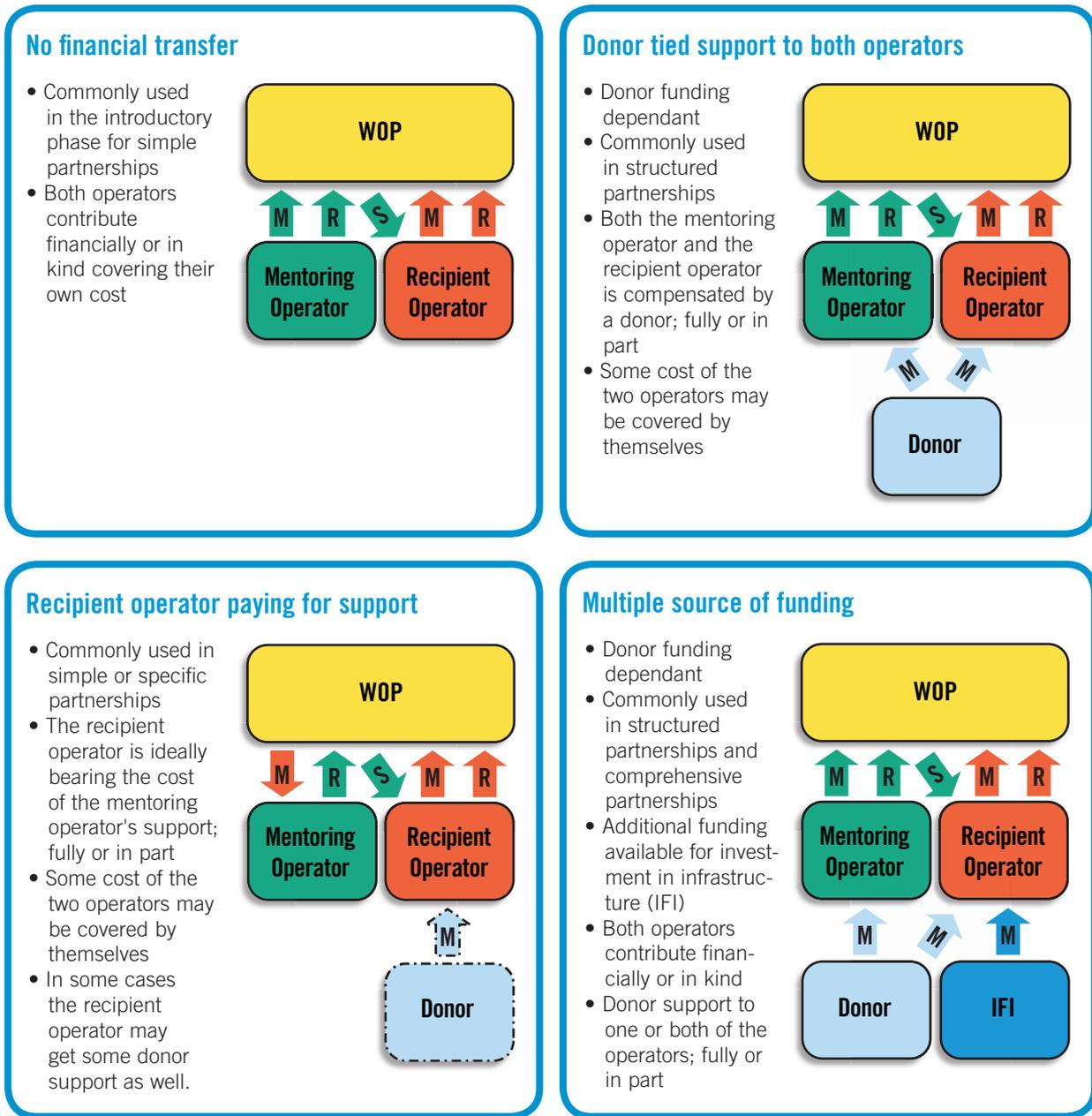
The source of funding and related payment methods may affect the performance of the partnerships and consequently may have an impact on the improvements of targeted performance indicators. Commonly, a mentoring operator can be fully or partially compensated for his efforts on a not-for-profit basis, while a recipient operator may be encouraged by an externally financed bonus in case of full compliance with the targeted performance indicators at the end of the partnership. A recipient operator should also, if possible, commit itself to the partnership by covering part of the costs of the supporting services, in order to internalize the project and increase accountability.

Different schemes of financial flows between water operators involved in partnerships have been observed. There are of course many variations underlying the following five examples shown overleaf.

In any given appropriate context, funding may come directly from donors and financial institutions to the recipient operator only, allowing for the coverage of costs for the mentoring operator's support. This approach would strengthen the role of the recipient operator who would also then be more accountable to the funding institutions.

² Data from Vitens-Evides International and Stockholm Water Company's projects/Sida reports

Diagram 1: Financial flows (S = support; M = Money; R = Resources)



Donor tied support to mentoring operator

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