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The EU Water Initiative at 15: origins, processes and assessment

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the activities and achievements of the European Union Water Initiative, a transnational, multi-actor partnership established in 2002 by the European Commission to support water governance reforms around the world. Two regional components of the initiative – (a) Africa and (b) Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia – are studied with a focus on their organizational structures, activities, policies and achievements. The analysis provides evidence for improved regional dialogue and cooperation in the water sector, but also points to persistent weaknesses, in particular a lack of resources, ownership and mutual understanding as to the overall aims of the Initiative.

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Introduction

The European Union Water Initiative (EUWI) is a transnational, multi-actor initiative, established in 2002 by the European Commission with a view to strengthening the UN Millennium Development Goals and the World Summit on Sustainable Development targets for water in developing countries (European Commission, 2003). The promotion of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) and support during its implementation lie at the heart of the EUWI; this includes principles such as river basin planning, resource efficiency, stakeholder participation and equitable use (Beveridge & Monsees, 2012; Gain, Rouillard, & Benson, 2013). Almost 15 years after its adoption, and in light of the fact that the Millennium Development Goals were initially due to be achieved by 2015, the time is ripe for an assessment of the EUWI.

The origins of the initiative date back to the Johannesburg UN World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002. When UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan identified water management in developing countries as a priority for improvement, the European Commission (2002b) published a ‘Communication on Water Management in Developing Countries’, mapping out ‘a comprehensive and integrated approach’ based on the ‘over-arching principles of Integrated Water Resource Management’ (p. 3). The communication also refers to developing ‘an EU initiative to address ... priority issues related to water and development’ (p. 22). European countries pledged their commitment to these aims in a Council of the European Union (2002), outlining an ‘initiative for a “strategic partnership”

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with governments and non-state actors' (European Commission, 2002b, p. 7). Such an approach was consistent with the Type II Partnerships that feature multi-stakeholder, collaborative governance, promoted by the UN at the summit (Mert, 2009). In this context, a high-level delegation comprising the EU Commission president, council president and commissioners for the environment and development adopted the EUWI in Johannesburg (European Commission, 2003).

Three transnational partnerships were initially formed to implement the EUWI. Between 2002 and 2003, a Working Group for Africa was developed, based on the EU-Africa Strategic Partnership on Water Affairs and Sanitation, signed in Johannesburg. Other partnerships were adopted for (a) Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA); (b) Latin America; and (c) shortly after the World Summit, the Mediterranean. The first activities addressed the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (United Nations, 2002, p. 15) requirement for adopting national IWRM plans. After 2006, the EUWI entered a phase of consolidation in which existing partnerships expanded both geographically and in scope of activity. In 2012 a fifth regional partnership was launched in China. Although the EUWI formally still exists, water partnerships have been, since 2015, increasingly integrated into wider forms of regional cooperation, for instance in Africa, whereas others such as the China Europe Water Platform downplay their EUWI membership in external communication and emphasize their regional identity instead.

Despite its importance, the EUWI has received little scholarly attention. Two projects are noteworthy. Partzsch (2007) examines the four EUWI partnerships in Africa, EECCA, Latin America and the Mediterranean to assess their effectiveness and legitimacy. The author concludes that, despite their achievements, these partnerships fell short on delivery, not least due to the lack of operational objectives and schedules. Furthermore, partnerships suffered from legitimacy deficits, partly because they were EU-dominated and often lacked the participation of relevant non-state actors. Other outputs include case studies focusing on stakeholder participation in EUWI partnerships (Partzsch, 2008) and water pricing (Partzsch, 2009). On the other hand, Stewart and Gray (2006, 2009) offer, as part of a comparative project on water partnerships in the region, an in-depth analysis of the EUWI in Africa, reporting that the partnership was dominated by the EU and its member states, with little buy-in from African actors. These works have two things in common: they study the formative years of the EUWI between 2002 and 2006, and consequently they focus on organizations and procedures rather than on outputs. Unfortunately, no follow-up research exists on the achievements made once the EUWI was up and running. There is, in fact, a burgeoning literature on EU actions to export its water policy principles globally (e.g., Mukhtarov, 2014; Wetzel, 2011); likewise, authors have explored transnational water partnerships in Africa, Asia and the Americas (Biswas, 2011; Labadie, Fontane, Lee, & Ko, 2007; Saruchera & Lautze, 2016). However, to our knowledge, none of these studies considers the integral role of the EUWI.

This article addresses this research gap. It considers two EUWI partnerships, Africa and EECCA, with a view to analyzing their organizational structures, activities, policies and achievements, as well as factors constraining and facilitating the initiative. In doing so extensive use is made of documentary evidence, in addition to 20 interviews of EU, national and international policy actors. However, let us clarify what we do not do in

this article. We do not study the underlying reasons for EU institutions and member states to establish and finance the EUWI. This would require us to look into past and current EU foreign policy discourses. Instead, we are interested in treating the EUWI as an independent variable: we study the *nature* and *effects* of the EUWI. Likewise, we do not engage in normative discussions, i.e., we do not ask whether the initiative, and its underlying rationales, are desirable or not. True, these are very important questions, but we will leave them for another day and another article.

What follows has six parts. The next section offers an overview of the procedural and substantive objectives associated with EUWI transnational partnerships, and the third reports on our data and methods. The next two present in-depth case studies of the EUWI in Africa and EECCA, respectively; and the section after that takes a comparative perspective. A final section presents our conclusions.

Goals and targets of the EUWI

The EUWI represents a direct response to the Millennium Development Goals as developed at the UN Millennium Summit, held in New York in September 2000. The goals and their constitutive targets cover a range of issues, from extreme poverty to primary education, environmental protection and gender equality. Generally, they cover the so-far-neglected social pillar of sustainable development. The most relevant water-related target is to halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.

The above-mentioned EU communication (European Commission, 2002b) identified areas of priority for future EU development policy in the field of water. In doing so, this document reiterated the policy agenda advanced at the Millennium Summit and, importantly, placed it in the context of IWRM principles, setting the tone for the EU's position at the 2002 Johannesburg Summit.

The first statement of what would later become the EUWI was then made a few weeks after Johannesburg (European Commission, 2002a). This document, essentially a PowerPoint slideshow, summarizes key decisions made by EU and member-state representatives in Johannesburg. It was agreed to establish regional partnerships to

raise political awareness; reinforce political commitment to action; contribute to the achievement of targets on water and sanitation, integrated water resources management, biodiversity; promote new partnerships, involving all stakeholders; improve[d] efficiency through co-ordination (European Commission, 2002a).

IWRM appears here as one of two cross-cutting themes, next to 'water supply and sanitation, with a focus on access to rural and peri-urban poor', operationalized through the 'establishment of national plans' and 'management of transboundary river basins and other water bodies'.

One year later, in 2003, the European Commission published a more official document about the EUWI's partnership approach. It echoes the ambitions expressed at Johannesburg, but departs from the 2002 slides in two respects. First, greater emphasis is placed on the identification of additional, i.e. non-EU, funding sources to work towards the Millennium Development Goals; both the 2002 communication and the Johannesburg presentation slides put a much higher premium on EU financial

aid. Second, IWRM as a wholesale approach to water management has disappeared as an objective in its own right, although there is no doubt that the 2003 document still breathes its spirit.

All three documents discussed so far mention the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD, 2000/60/EC) as a potential source of inspiration (European Commission, 2002a, 2002b, p. 14, 2003, p. 5; European Union, 2005). The WFD is arguably the most ambitious piece of EU legislation in the field of water. The directive defines a framework for IWRM in Europe with a view to achieving 'good water status' by 2015 (now extended to 2021) (Boeuf & Fritsch, 2016; Boeuf, Fritsch, & Martin-Ortega, 2016). Institutional novelties include the management of water at hydrological scales, public participation, and the use of economic tools. However, it is important not to misinterpret the EUWI as an attempt to promote the WFD outside Europe. The WFD is a water quality directive and largely ignores problems related to water quantity, provision and supply. Consequently, the WFD only partially represents IWRM principles (Fritsch & Benson, 2013; Rahaman, Varis, & Kajander, 2004) and certainly does not address the wider social agenda set at the Millennium Summit. Nevertheless, core elements of the WFD such as stakeholder involvement and river basin management may serve as role models for EUWI partner countries.

After the adoption of the EUWI in 2003, the objectives of the initiative were continuously reinterpreted, newly defined and, more importantly, operationalized. This is for three reasons. First, the original objectives, although sufficiently specific to provide a general sense of direction, were too vague to inform concrete activities and policies. Second, the original objectives were not context-sensitive. Third, the EU and its member states shied away from imposing goals on EUWI partner countries.

Instead it was envisaged to develop more operational objectives together with national and subnational policy makers, as well as with stakeholders from the global North and South (see Stewart & Gray, 2009, for a case study of EUWI Zambia). The development of those operational objectives was therefore contingent on the extent to which such partnerships would be established and filled with life, thereby making functioning partnerships a goal in itself. Previous research suggests that this is where the problems started. As initiators, facilitators and funders, the EU and the member states were in a rather strong position vis-à-vis EUWI partner countries. Apparently, this had two effects. Due to the general leadership role taken by Europe, actors in partner countries remained rather passive when it came to defining the aims and objectives of EUWI activities, assuming that Europe would prefer a proactive role here as well. Furthermore, the perception of Europe's being in control occasionally resulted in a lack of ownership in partner countries, and therefore a lack of initiative when it came to the further refinement of EUWI objectives (Partzsch, 2007; Stewart & Gray, 2009).

All this is to say that the EUWI represents a patchwork of objectives, some rather vague, others quite specific and operational, which differ from region to region and have been continually revised. It is therefore suitable to describe the EUWI as an opportunity for dialogue and cooperation rather than a specific policy, but held together by the overall objective of working towards the Millennium Development Goals. It would make little sense to compare EUWI outcomes against the overall achievement of these goals, which involve a variety of sectors and areas other than

water and were tackled by a multiplicity of actors and policy initiatives. On the other hand, in the absence of a clearly defined set of goals, the EUWI remains a moving target, making an assessment of what the initiative has achieved so far a somewhat fluid enterprise.

Methods and data

This article focuses on two regional components of the Water Initiative: EUWI Africa, commonly known as the Africa Working Group (AWG), and EUWI EECCA. The AWG represents the first and original area of interest for EUWI activities; the EUWI EECCA, in contrast, is probably the most active of the five EUWI partnerships, especially in terms of approximating the WFD.

Our research is based on documentary analysis of the many documents charting the history and achievements of the EUWI and its regional components, including annual reports, brochures, minutes of meetings, presentations at conferences, webpages, publications arising from the EUWI, and EU internal and external evaluations and critique. In addition, 20 semi-structured interviews were carried out with EU officials working in the Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO), consultants hired by the EU, officials from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the UN Economic Commission for Europe, EU member-state development agencies, government representatives of EUWI partner countries, and non-state actors in both Europe and Africa. The Appendix provides a full list of our interviewees.

The Africa Working Group

The AWG, the African regional component of the EUWI, is primarily responsible for the EUWI's activities in sub-Saharan Africa. In the early 2000s many countries on the continent were a far cry from achieving the Millennium Development Goals for water and sanitation (European Commission, 2009), resulting in a call from African policy makers for international support for the African water agenda (INT01). It is therefore not surprising that the European Commission prioritized Africa when they conceptualized the EUWI (European Commission, 2012a).

The partnership

According to the European Commission (2012c, p. 12), 'The diversity of its membership is one of the strengths of the AWG and fits with the multi-stakeholder ethos of the EUWI.' However, in practice state actors have been most active, namely the European Commission (in particular DG DEVCO), EU member states and African states. The key African partner is the African Ministerial Council on Water (AMCOW), while several EU member states, including Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK, have also taken leadership roles, mainly through their development agencies. Non-state actors initially came from Europe, including Tearfund, Water Aid, World Wide Fund for Nature, and Global Water Partnership (Partzsch, 2008). In later years groups from the global South, such as the African Civil Society Network on Water and

Sanitation, joined the partnership, but these have become less active again over time (INT02, INT03, INT05, INT08). Initially, the business community was involved as well (Partzsch, 2008), but we find little evidence of private-sector activities more recently (INT01; INT06).

The AWG is co-chaired by the AMCOW Technical Assistance Committee and an annually rotating EU member state, while a 'troika' consisting of the present chair, outgoing chair and incoming chair functions as the operational management body. The main means of operation is through AWG meetings between the troika, AMCOW and the other partners. Several meetings take place every year. Non-state actors are 'informed and consulted on ongoing strategic matters' (European Commission, 2011, p. 12), but not included in the troika or rotating AWG chair, nor do they attend regular 'technical' meetings of the core partnership, consisting of AMCOW, EU member states and the European Commission (INT01, INT06, INT08). Instead they may participate in larger, more open meetings, which take place twice a year in conjunction with events such as the African Water Week and the Stockholm World Water Week (INT06, INT08, INT10).

Activities

When the AWG originally emerged, in fact two Working Groups for Africa were established: one dealing with IWRM in transboundary contexts and the other with water and sanitation, chaired by France and Denmark, respectively (European Commission, 2012a).

The Working Group on IWRM mainly focused on the allocation of €10 million for transboundary river projects, announced at the World Summit. These projects were intended to support policy dialogue relating to the management of transboundary water resources and involving sub-regional bodies responsible for the promotion of cooperation between countries sharing river basins (European Commission, 2006, 2012c). Five such transboundary river basins were identified, with the Volta River held up as the first example of a river basin organization that had been established partly as a result of the AWG (European Commission, 2006). Although an analysis by the AWG in 2008 showed that over €40 million for transboundary water cooperation had been leveraged through the EUWI, mainly from African sources, the five projects were also reported to have suffered from rather slow implementation and did not form a sustained focus for AWG activities (European Commission, 2012c).

The AWG dealing with water and sanitation was concerned with establishing national-level dialogue platforms. These so-called Country Dialogues offered concrete opportunities to bring together water officials from EU and African countries to 'identify opportunities, constraints and financial gaps' and to discuss national policy reform in the water sector. The creation of national-level dialogues in Africa was also a response to rising criticism that the AWG was European-driven. It was thought that grounding the AWG's activities in concrete activities and discussions at the national level would help draw African partners into the partnership (INT05).

Several African countries were selected to undertake the first pilot Country Dialogues, including DR Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mozambique, Rwanda and Zambia (European Commission, 2006). The results, however, were disappointing. An independent review

found that Country Dialogues in all countries except Ethiopia lacked resources and time for setting up the dialogue and implementing any arising measures, in what was widely perceived as a foreign-driven exercise (Matz & Lofgren, 2008). In addition, there was lower ownership of the process in some countries. For example, a lead ministry was not identified in Mozambique, and the government did not appear to be involved at all in the Country Dialogue in Zambia (Matz & Lofgren, 2008).

Another source of disappointment was the lack of coordination between the Country Dialogues and the ACP-EU Water Facility, a development cooperation instrument established in 2004 by EuropeAid with a view to providing water and basic sanitation to the poor in African, Caribbean and Pacific states (INT05). The Water Facility came in two phases. The first had an allocation of around €500 million and made calls for proposals in 2004 and again in 2006; a second, smaller phase made a call for proposals in 2010 for around €200 million. The majority of projects were conducted in Africa. Ghana, for example, then stopped their Country Dialogue after their proposals to the Water Facility were unsuccessful. It was perceived by Ghanaian actors that the Country Dialogue was not leading to results, which points to a difference in the interpretation of what the results of the Country Dialogues were expected to be. For European actors, and especially the European Commission, the Country Dialogues were primarily a political instrument, with few directly attached resources (INT01). African actors, and in particular NGOs and national-government officials, were interested in actions on the ground at a local level and saw the Country Dialogues mostly as a way of raising finances for projects, such as from the Water Facility (INT02, INT03). In 2007, it was agreed to continue Country Dialogues only where there was sufficient progress and demand by the partner country (Matz & Lofgren, 2008).

The two working groups were merged in 2006 at the start of what was effectively a new phase of the AWG. This new phase was in part a response to an early perception that the EUWI was not working effectively (European Commission, 2012a). WaterAid and Tearfund (2005), for instance, observed a lack of political commitment from many EU member states, inadequate provision for progress monitoring, bias towards European officials rather than African partners (who had too few resources to take part in the meetings), and undue emphasis on private finance to increase the much-needed funding for the sector.

Consequently, after 2006 the AWG focused less on the EU partners and more on African partners. Four novelties are noteworthy. More AWG meetings were held in Africa, usually in association with AMCOW Technical Assistance Committee meetings (European Commission, 2012a). On the other hand, AMCOW itself was institutionally strengthened, in part by funding from the ACP-EU Water Facility as well as from individual EU member states (European Commission, 2012a). This allowed AMCOW for the first time to establish an operational secretariat in Abuja and to function as a coordinated interlocutor with the EU. Furthermore, the Water Facility provided funds to the African Civil Society Network on Water and Sanitation, thereby also helping balance the initial European bias when it comes to NGO representation. Finally, efforts were made to align the AWG's work plans and priorities with those of AMCOW more broadly (European Commission, 2011). Accordingly, the AWG was 'an instrument to promote the stronger prioritization of water in the national priorities.... The EU would be there to respond to the priorities of the countries' (INT01).

With the strengthening of AMCOW, the AWG adopted a new approach by prioritizing high-level policy dialogues rather than Country Dialogues. These dialogues involved AMCOW, the European Commission and interested member states, but non-state actors had input into some meetings and activities (European Commission, 2009, 2010). According to the European Commission (2010, p. 13), this strategic dialogue helped in ‘harmonising European views and policies for several important initiatives’. It resulted in a number of joint declarations on water and sanitation, agreed positions on international governance processes, and several initiatives to coordinate donor funding for water governance on the continent.

For example, in 2007 the AWG held an e-conference on sanitation that provided inputs for the Africa-EU Statement on Sanitation for the International Year of Sanitation in 2008 (European Commission, 2012c). The statement was formally launched at the AWG side event held at the UN Commission for Sustainable Development’s 16th session in New York in May 2008. The African Union Heads of State then endorsed this statement at their meeting in Sharm El-Sheik in July 2008, mentioning the EUWI in the final declaration. The statement also fed into the 11th African Union Summit, Meeting the Millennium Development Goals on Water and Sanitation, and the AfricaSan+5 Conference, both held in 2008 (European Commission, 2012c). Major outputs from this meeting were two African declarations on water: an AfricaSan Action Plan and the eThekweni Declaration. By signing the latter, governments pledged themselves to 11 commitments on sanitation, including the adoption, review and update of national sanitation and hygiene policies within 12 months, and the establishment of national plans accelerating progress to meet sanitation goals and the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. Interviewees (INT01, INT05, INT08) suggested that the capacity of African actors in the partnership to draw up policy at that time was extremely low, and so the AWG, and especially European members, was highly influential in developing both the joint statements and declarations and also the African ones. According to one interviewee, 80% of the eThekweni Declaration was drafted by European NGOs (INT08).

Generally, the focus of the AWG has changed over time. Although at first there was sufficient interest in IWRM to warrant a separate working group, much of the attention of the AWG was directed at the water and sanitation agenda – which matched the donor background of the EU country representatives participating in the AWG. However, in later years there has been renewed interest in IWRM, and the AWG also supported the development of a number of reports on IWRM, such as the ‘Status Report on the Application of Integrated Approaches to Water Resources Management in Africa 2012’ (AMCOW, 2012). The report’s findings fed into the Ministerial Declaration of the 4th Africa Water Week, which declared support and commitment for the development of a ‘regular, evidence-based reporting system on water resources management’ (European Commission, 2012b, p. 9). As a complement to this report, the AWG also commissioned research on the financing of transboundary water cooperation in Africa and initiated training workshops for stakeholders from African river basin organizations (European Commission, 2014).

More recently again, interest in IWRM approaches has itself become overshadowed by debate around the food-energy-water nexus – a more holistic vision of water management (Benson, Gain, & Rouillard, 2015). The inclusion of the nexus on the

AWG agenda has been largely driven by Germany, a leading EU member state in the AWG and a strong financial supporter of AMCOW (INT05, INT08, INT09). There has also been activity around the area of water resources and infrastructure, which is more in line with the background of many AMCOW members. The AWG lobbied successfully for the inclusion of this topic in the 2014 Joint Africa EU Strategy Road Map, a work plan for steering the implementation of the strategy between 2014 and 2017 (INT01, INT03, INT10).

Key achievements

Early EUWI attempts to engage directly with the water sector in an African context largely failed, especially in the Country Dialogues, which were criticized as being largely externally imposed on African countries. The only exception is Ethiopia, and here a close network of donors and activities predates the EUWI Country Dialogue, which according to one interviewee goes a long way towards explaining its success (INT05). The success of the subsequent reformulation of the partnership in the second phase of the AWG is harder to analyze. A European Commission official explains:

If you take the mechanism for what it is, then the results are reasonable. If you look at it as a platform for discussion, harmonizing policy, discussing ideas, preparing international processes and events, then this has been quite positive. But if you expected that by being part of it, automatically resources would flow, then that expectation has not been the reality.... When people start asking how many people on the ground have gained access to water because of this platform, then it has not worked. (INT01)

According to the same official, the AWG has had high visibility and substantial results compared to the small investment made.

One of the most significant achievements of the AWG has been the increased visibility and stronger prioritization of water on national and continent-wide political agendas. This can particularly be seen in the AWG's role in promoting and facilitating the development of an African agenda in the field of water and sanitation leading up to the African Union's 2008 Sharm El-Sheik summit, as well as the support for progress towards achieving the water-related Millennium Development Goals in Africa by heads of state in the eThekweni Declaration.

In terms of content, this was a very strong period of the AWG ... [when] then EU member states were inputting at a very high level, more than just reacting to the different proposals discussed.... The work of the AWG speeded up the knowledge and capacity on sanitation in Africa tremendously. (INT08)

There has also been some success at supporting other aspects of the international water agenda on the continent. For example, the 2012 status report on the application of IWRM on the continent was integrated into the Rio+20 process and also formed the basis of the Ministerial Statement at the 4th African Water Week (INT03). More recently, the AWG has been instrumental in securing a high priority for water in the Joint Africa EU Strategy (INT01, INT03, INT10).

Perhaps the most profound achievement of the AWG, however, has been in the establishment and recognition of AMCOW as a relevant player in water governance on

the continent. Although AMCOW was established alongside the AWG in April 2002, it was not initially a strong African voice in the water sector:

At that time there were not really coordinated counterparts on the Africa side. In 2005 there was no African Ministerial Council on Water, or at least no secretariat. If you invite a minister without any secretariat or a team of people, it's just inviting an individual to participate in a meeting – it's not the same as if there is some coordination. (INT05)

As argued above, EU financial resources were subsequently invested in strengthening AMCOW and helping it establish a secretariat. Technical and financial support were also provided for the African Civil Society Network on Water and Sanitation and, more recently, for the African Network of Basin Organizations, AMCOW's implementation agency for activities concerning transboundary water resources (INT07, INT10).

The EUWI EECCA

The water sector in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia inherited extensive infrastructure from the Soviet Union, which then began deteriorating immediately after independence. Although several countries made progress in improving infrastructure and water governance, for instance through large-scale projects, water infrastructure became, generally speaking, outdated due to lack of funding and strategic planning. Meeting the Millennium Development Goals therefore required substantial reforms, in particular towards IWRM principles (European Commission, 2010).

The partnership

The EUWI EECCA focuses on 12 countries in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. Members of the EECCA working group are the relevant government authorities in EECCA countries, the European Commission (in particular DG DEVCO), and the donor agencies in EU member states and associated countries, including Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland (European Commission, 2012c). International financial institutions such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Asian Development Bank also attend meetings (INT12, INT13, INT14).

The working group is chaired by the water director in the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change of Romania. The OECD and the UN Economic Commission for Europe are strategic partners for the implementation of EUWI EECCA measures. Although some NGOs, such as Mama 86 from the Ukraine (INT04, INT08), also participate, the partnership is mainly driven by state actors (Partzsch, 2008; INT11, INT13).

In addition to the working group, which operates at the regional level, the EUWI EECCA also established National Policy Dialogues, which bring together stakeholders and domestic policy makers. These networks are usually chaired by heads of government agencies responsible for water management and involve ministries, parliamentary bodies, the private sector, NGOs, academics and water user associations (European

Commission, 2015; INT14). The chair of each National Policy Dialogue also participates in the regional-level EUWI EECCA Working Group. By 2006, two National Policy Dialogues had been initiated, in Armenia and Moldova (European Commission, 2007). In 2010 and 2011, further dialogues were initiated in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (European Commission, 2011).

Activities

At the regional level, the partnership facilitates the soft transfer of ideas around international and EU approaches to water policy. For example, the agenda for the 18th Working Group Meeting in June 2014 included the water-food-energy nexus, transboundary water cooperation, and green growth (EUWI EECCA, 2014). Each of these agenda items was resourced by an international expert from the European Commission, OECD or the UN Economic Commission for Europe. One interviewee recalled that in an early EUWI EECCA meeting a European Commission official was allowed to outline the EU's WFD approach 'and after that some countries said "yes, that's good, let's do it", and other countries were still thinking' (INT18). This way the Working Group exposed EECCA policy makers to the main priorities of international water discourse as well as to specific policy instruments and administrative techniques. In doing so the working group helped establish a coherent agenda for reform in EECCA countries, a coherence previously lacking as each country pursued its own priorities (INT17).

The National Policy Dialogues, in contrast, work towards adopting 'policy packages' of specific IWRM-related reforms in the water sector. In general, these dialogues are based on memoranda of understanding between the EECCA partner country and the non-EECCA strategic partner, focusing on three major topics: developing national water strategies and legislation applying the principles of IWRM, and more specifically the WFD; implementing the Protocol on Water and Health, under the auspices of the UN Economic Commission for Europe and the World Health Organization (Europe); and transboundary water cooperation (European Commission, 2013). The precise topics included in each dialogue depend on the demands of the government officials in the country concerned. However, transboundary water cooperation underpins most dialogues. For example, in Kyrgyzstan the dialogue focuses on establishing a river basin council for the transboundary Talas and Chu Rivers, in cooperation with Kazakhstan (European Commission, 2010).

The closer approximation of national EECCA water policies to the WFD is considered the central mandate of its strategic implementing partners (European Commission, 2015; INT11, INT13): 'Everything we do is first to facilitate the closer approximation or closer convergence of the EU *acquis*, especially the EU WFD.... On a country-by-country basis we have to be flexible, but the ultimate objective remains the same' (INT11).

By 2014, 9 out of 10 countries with National Policy Dialogues in progress reported ongoing activities concerning the EU WFD principles (European Commission, 2014, p.14). For example, in Armenia, the dialogue initiated reforms aimed at implementing river basin management and the use of economic instruments (European Commission, 2010), explicitly taking the WFD as a source of inspiration. In Georgia, on the basis of a

background study, ‘Review of the Georgian Legal and Institutional Water Framework and Recommendations for Implementation of EU WFD Principles, Including Preparation of a National Water Law’, the National Policy Dialogue decided in 2012 to develop water legislation further. An inter-ministerial working group was then established to draft a new water law by spring 2013 (European Commission, 2013). For this process, the WFD became ‘the number-one most important piece of legislation’ (INT15).

National water legislation or strategies in five countries have also incorporated IWRM principles other than those reflected in the WFD (European Commission, 2014). In Moldova, a dialogue on IWRM resulted in a governmental order on wastewater discharge from municipal sources (European Commission, 2014.). The draft Azerbaijan National Water Strategy was finalized in 2012 with the overall objective of introducing IWRM principles (European Commission, 2013). The Turkmenistan National Policy Dialogue led to a detailed report about reforming the national Water Code and other legal acts for implementation of IWRM (European Commission, 2014).

The National Policy Dialogue in Russia is the only one not to lead to the adoption of IWRM principles. Instead, the dialogue has focused on economic instruments for water resources management, including a review of these instruments at the federal level as well as a project exploring their use at the sub-sovereign and basin levels (European Commission, 2014). Use of economic instruments was also discussed in three other dialogues. The one in Azerbaijan led to the development of a strategy for applying new economic instruments, such as the reform of water abstraction fees (European Commission, 2014). Moldova initiated a review of domestic financial support mechanisms for water supply and sanitation in 2014 (European Commission, 2014). Consequently, the European Commission (2012b, p. 10) concludes that National Policy Dialogues

have been useful to inject some financial realism in water supply and sanitation policies and to demonstrate that there is room to manoeuvre to use water prices to enhance water efficiency and raise the revenue needed to operate water services.

Key achievements

Providing a platform for the exchange of ideas, the EECCA partnership has, at the regional level, helped stimulate discussion and learning on key elements of the international water governance discourse such as IWRM and the nexus agenda. Thanks to National Policy Dialogues, first experiences in policy transfer have been made at the national level. For example, all countries have started to work on river basin management plans, and a majority have embarked on reforms aimed at better cost recovery, but only Moldova has fully implemented this (INT13). The dialogues aim to establish the added value of these principles in the national policy context rather than to engage in any direct copying of the WFD. ‘No one talks at the moment about the full implementation of the WFD in this region – it is clear that they are thinking about the approximation and convergence in some instances and the assimilation of principles’ (INT13).

In general, countries geographically closer to the EU's borders, and especially those which have signed an association agreement with the EU, tend to be more interested in adapting their national water management practices to the WFD (INT11, INT12, INT16, INT17). So far, Moldova is the only EUWI partner country that has signed and ratified an association agreement with the EU. Two other countries, Georgia and Ukraine, have negotiated but not yet ratified such an agreement. Association agreements come with multiple obligations to approximate domestic law to the *acquis communautaire* of the EU; in turn, associated countries benefit from EU bilateral funding. Because association agreements constitute an important step towards EU membership, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have a powerful incentive to focus their EUWI activities on the adoption of EU water legislation:

This EU association agreement is a kind of engine for all those changes in legislation in Georgia.... Before the existence of the agreement we can say there was some inner steering from the ministerial part, but there was a lack of resources and capacity and a lack of visionary leaders to do this. But after the association agreement there was really no other way, and the government felt that this was something that really had to be fulfilled. (INT15)

The other three countries in Eastern Europe – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus – have not signed association agreements yet, but play a central role in the Eastern Partnership, one of the three pillars of the European Neighbourhood Policy. This is an EU foreign policy tool aimed at shaping domestic policies in Europe's wider sphere of influence (Lavenex, 2004). The European Neighbourhood Policy involves various forms of collaboration in multiple areas of policy, including water, and comes with opportunities for participating countries to obtain EU funding in support of economic, political and social reform. Again, participation in the European Neighbourhood Policy has clearly been beneficial in the EUWI context, due to the perspective of associate status and free access to the common market and also due to the additional funding available for the adoption of EU water policy principles (INT11, INT17, INT18). The five countries in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), as well as Russia, have much less reason to approximate EU water law, driving EUWI activities in alternative directions (INT18).

Comparing EUWI achievements in Africa and EECCA

As shown above, the EUWI partnerships in Africa and EECCA have taken rather different approaches, and their achievements vary across and within partnerships. Three factors are of particular importance: capacity and funding; objectives; and ownership.

First, the EUWI suffered from a general lack of capacity. While associated countries and those participating in the European Neighbourhood Policy may have benefited from additional resources for concrete actions on the ground, the general lack of funding clearly affected the quality of partnership between EU and African actors (WaterAid and Tearfund, 2005). At times, the EUWI competed with other international water initiatives. For example in Mozambique, the Country Dialogue was one of three similar processes – the others were the Global Water Partnership and the Water and

Sanitation Programme (Matz & Lofgren, 2008). As a consequence, governments and NGOs – the latter being generally underfunded – struggled to prioritize what meetings they could attend, and how actively, and ultimately became less active over time (INT05, INT08) – although, see below, this was not only a capacity issue. In other words, the key challenge to the AWG was to actually build a sustainable and functioning partnership, even before entering a more operational phase (see also Stewart & Gray, 2009). The AWG itself had limited funding, for example: less than €4 million euros for a three-year programme. This in part indicates a lack of political commitment from EU member states, who were to contribute funds when they held the rotating co-chair. Given these restrictions, it was perhaps ambitious to target the EUWI at the pan-African level. With 54 members in the African Union, the diversity of cultures, languages and contexts is vast, making coordination and reform more difficult than in smaller, more culturally similar regions such as EECCA.

Second, these capacity problems are linked to misunderstandings about the nature of the EUWI and its objectives. In particular, partner countries in Africa were under the impression that EUWI participation would automatically include access to EU funding (INT01, INT02, INT03). Members struggled to grasp that the EUWI was primarily a political instrument for policy dialogue and exchange. While the ACP-EU Water Facility, established in 2004, boasted the funds available, there was no practical way to link the Water Facility directly to the EUWI, resulting in disappointment and resistance. Ghana, for example, stopped its Country Dialogue when its funding proposals to the Water Facility were unsuccessful, in response to the perception that the Country Dialogue was rather ineffective (INT01, INT02).

Finally, the EUWI is characterized by low levels of ownership. This includes policy makers from the EU and EUWI partner countries, but also non-state actors. As argued above, local and national policy makers in Africa and EECCA were mainly concerned with raising funds for water projects, and interest in the EUWI waned when external funds began to dry up (INT01, INT02). NGOs, in contrast, found that the high-level, continental and inter-continental, wide policy discussions did not fit their own priorities for grass-roots action:

At the highest political level there was commitment, but if you go below that there was difficulty in getting participation in telephone conferences and to establish dates for meetings – at that operational level it was very difficult to get them involved and on board. (INT06)

This lack of engagement was significant given that the European Commission aimed to ‘respond to the priorities of the countries rather than drive the process’ (INT01). However, interest from EU member states was also lower than anticipated (INT01, INT06). For instance, in the last years of the AWG, no EU member state has taken the co-chair role, which instead has been filled by the European Commission. Consequently, while the commission originally saw itself as coordinating collaborations between EU member states and EUWI partner countries, in reality they found it difficult to find counterparts in Africa while also struggling with a limited pool of EU member states who stepped forward to take a leadership role and to provide financial resources (INT05).

Conclusion

This article has examined two regional components of the EUWI, Africa and EECCA, to ascertain what has been achieved almost 15 years after the adoption of the initiative. Each component was based on the same design principles, i.e. regional and national-level partnerships of state and non-state actors formed to resolve water governance issues. However, two very different partnerships have evolved in practice. After initially unsuccessful attempts to engage with state and non-state actors at the country level, the AWG reframed its activities around promoting high-level policy dialogues mainly between state actors at a regional level. In contrast, the EUWI EECCA proved more successful in fostering country-level dialogues that promoted a closer approximation of the WFD approach at the national level.

In both of these partnerships, however, the initial weaknesses of the EUWI, identified by authors such as Partzsch (2007, 2008, 2009) and Stewart and Gray (2006, 2009), persist. First, operational objectives and schedules remain patchy at best and mostly led by the recipient countries and actors. To some extent this bottom-up approach has many advantages, but it can be problematic if partner countries are erratic or lacking in zeal. The work of the EUWI is also influenced by the ebb and flow of the international (donor-driven) water agenda and is currently being redirected towards nexus debates. Second, a legitimacy deficit and a lack of ownership still hamper the effective functioning of the EUWI, despite considerable efforts by the European Commission. This is most acute in the AWG, where non-state actors and the private sector are almost entirely absent and where the rotating co-chair has been unoccupied for several years. Several additional weaknesses of the EUWI in practice have been identified in this article, including the lack of capacity of the EUWI in terms of funding and personnel, persistent misunderstanding of the nature of the EUWI as a political instrument rather than a source of funding, and the hugely ambitious nature of the initiative in its original conception. In contrast, where the EUWI has been most successful appears to have less to do with the operational details of the initiative itself and more to do with the geographical proximity and political association of the partner country with the EU.

Our results come with caveats and provide avenues for future research. First, the initiative taken by the European Commission can conveniently be related to wider discourses portraying the EU as a key actor and normative power in the environmental field and other areas (Manners, 2002; Selin & VanDeveer, 2015). However, the political, economic and strategic interests of exceptionally proactive EU member states, i.e., those actors funding the initiative and supporting its day-to-day work, are less well understood. Second, EUWI regional networks in Africa and EECCA, but also in Latin America, the Mediterranean and China, have taken very different directions when it comes to organization, processes and, last but not least, thematic emphases. Further work is needed to better understand the link between the domestic priorities of EUWI partner countries and the multiple aims and objectives reflected in EU and member states' foreign policies (Carta & Morin, 2014; Keukeleire & Delreux, 2014). Third, the EUWI competes and interacts with various national and international policy initiatives; such 'ecologies of games' have attracted scholarly attention at the national level (Lubell, Henry, & McCoy, 2010), but less so in the international sphere. Finally, although the EUWI aimed to support the Millennium Development Goals, which were to be reached by 2015, it is still too early to assess the outcomes of the EUWI – after all,

it will take a while for patterns of improved (or not) water quality and quantity to become visible. In any case, the scale and complexity of the water-related challenges in many countries mean that the thorny question of outcomes will remain on the agenda of scholars studying the EUWI and similar initiatives for some time.

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Appendix: Interviews

- INT01 – Official, Secretariat EUWI, European Commission, 23 September 2015
- INT02 – EUWI Programme Manager, Stockholm International Water Institute, 6 October 2015
- INT03 – Former Chairman, African Civil Society Network on Water and Sanitation, 9 October 2015
- INT04 – Representative, Global Water Partnership, 14 October 2015
- INT05 – Independent water expert, 15 October 2015
- INT06 – Associate, IRC, 16 October 2015
- INT07 – Project Manager, African Network of Basin Organizations, 19 October 2015
- INT08 – Steering Committee member, Women for Water, 21 October 2015
- INT09 – Official, Secretariat Global Nexus, German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ), 28 October 2015
- INT10 – Representative, Secretariat Southern African Network of Water Centres of Excellence, 7 December 2015
- INT11 – Team Leader, Environment Directorate, OECD, 1 December 2015
- INT12 – Expert, Finnish Environment Institute, 1 December 2015
- INT13 – Project Manager, Environment Directorate, OECD, 3 December 2015
- INT14 – Director, Directorate for Water Resources Management, Ministry of Environment and Forests, Romania, 8 December 2015
- INT15 – Independent expert, Georgia, 11 December 2015
- INT16 – Expert, Finnish Environment Institute, 11 December 2015
- INT17 – Official, DG Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, European Commission, 14 December 2015
- INT18 – Expert, Secretariat OECD/EAP Task Force, 15 December 2015
- INT19 – Regional Advisor, UNECE, 21 December 2015
- INT20 – Environmental Affairs Officer, Secretariat UNECE, 21 December 2015