

THE FUTURE IS PUBLIC: WORKING PAPER 2

Paris celebrates decade of public water success

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A decade ago, the municipality of Paris decided to take water management back in public hands. This decision in a global city like the capital of France had a worldwide impact. It ended a long period of a fragmented and opaque organisation that had seen a joint venture in charge of water production and two private corporations in charge of water distribution since the mid-1980s. This structure diluted accountability and meant continuously rising water tariffs. Remunicipalising water has resulted in a diverse, democratically elected board, tariffs being lowered by eight per cent, 1,200 drinking water fountains across the city, and support for people who are struggling to pay their water, energy and housing costs.

A bold political statement

Eau de Paris provides its 3 million users with high quality water, 24/7, all year round. Since its inception in 2009, the public company's vision has extended far beyond industrial matters of water production, distribution, treatment and infrastructure. Water is not just another commodity but a vital, common good of humanity and should be managed as such, guided solely by the public interest.

Freed from shareholder pressure and from the constant drive for short-term returns on investment and dividend payments, public management of water guarantees that all revenues are reinvested in the service and that decisions are based on a long-term approach, with the best interest of present and future generations in mind.

In this respect, Eau de Paris bears strong and real values that are not marketing labels but inspire every single daily action. Among these values, the city wanted Eau de Paris to be a flagship of transparency. This was achieved by providing open access to all key information on the water service, including the financial accounts, as well as through genuine democratic control.

The board of Eau de Paris is made up of elected municipal officials and staff representatives, as well as representatives of independent NGOs advocating for water users and the environment. This open governance enables political and citizen oversight of the company's activities and decisions.

In 2017, Eau de Paris was awarded the prestigious UN Public Service Award in recognition of its daily work in the areas of accountability, transparency and integrity. In the years to come, Eau de Paris plans to renew its commitment to public participation and to allow citizens to take part in the public company's decision-making through a participatory budget.

A sound, practical decision

Eau de Paris was born of the will of the municipal council to directly control drinking water service, with a single publicly owned and controlled operator that would comply with the highest standards of efficiency. By integrating every step of the water supply chain, from the water catchment to the service delivered to end users, Eau de Paris is able to manage the system as a whole. This allows for economies of scale, a more resilient system as well as full control and accountability.

A decade after remunicipalisation, Eau de Paris's top-of-its-class industrial and economic performance blatantly contradicts the naysayers who predicted a failure when the city decided not to renew its contracts with Veolia and Suez in 2008, and instead created a new public operator. A few figures

illustrate the public operator's capacity to efficiently run the water service for a major metropolis: a network yield above 90 per cent—ten points above the national average for water lost to leakage, and a flawless water quality record, with a 100 per cent rate of compliance for two consecutive years in 2017 and 2018. This unprecedented performance was made possible by the expertise of the Eau de Paris team and their constant supervision and adaption of processes and treatments to meet evolving public health standards.

As a public service provider dedicated to upholding our commitment to a controlled and affordable water price, Eau de Paris's bases its investment strategy on a rigorous analysis of investment needs. This helps maintain the lowest cost for users and supports sustainability by reducing the service's environmental footprint. Using this logic, innovation must be both a creator of value and a source of long-term savings. Our investment strategy is based on three successive stages: research, experimentation and upscaling. Over 75M€ is invested each year, almost entirely self-financed. This is a high but sound level. Eau de Paris refuses investments that are oversized in relation to our real needs, that are new for the sake of being new. In a logic of evolution rather than revolution, we prefer to build upon our exceptional hydraulic heritage. Innovation is also about inventing ways to maintain and adapt century-old infrastructure to our current needs.

Solidarity and responsibility

Universal, affordable access to drinking water for all is an integral part of our DNA at Eau de Paris. As such, one of the board's first decisions when Eau de Paris was founded was to lower water prices by eight per cent. It was presented as a way to give back to the people part of the profits that private operators were making on the water service but was also a sign that public management really means affordability for everyone. Since then, there has been strict oversight of water rates. In 2019, rates remain lower than before remunicipalisation and are still the lowest in the greater Paris area at 1,08€ per cubic meter.

The public company also contributes 500.000€ each year to the *Fonds de solidarité pour le logement de Paris*, a fund which helps households that struggle to meet their housing expenses, including recurring costs such as energy and water.

Raising awareness within all sectors of the public about responsible water use is part of the same commitment to universal, affordable drinking water. We place a strong focus on children and youth, as well as on social care professionals who can do broad public outreach, especially to people who are economically disadvantaged. Through our trademark "Water ambassadors" program we reach out to poorer households and help them conserve water and tackle leaks while promoting the use of tap water as a safe and cheap choice. This strategy allows us to counter the fact that people living on low incomes also have the lowest level of trust in the water service and spend the most on bottled water. Eau de Paris also works specifically with refugees and homeless people through partnerships with NGOs and participation in social welfare schemes developed at the local level. We installed temporary fountains near refugee camps and NGOs distributed our water bottles and maps of public fountains. Eau de Paris's contribution to providing migrants with emergency access to water during recent heatwaves has been deemed remarkable by public authorities and NGOs caring for the needs of these people, who are living in extreme conditions.

For the last 10 years, Eau de Paris has maintained and stepped up its actions promoting access to water in public spaces. The company manages more than 1,200 public fountains. This probably makes Paris the world's best equipped city in terms of free access to water in public spaces. In 2016, the public company also helped implement the city's participatory budget¹ by installing 41 new fountains, including 11 fountains distributing sparkling water. During winter, about 80 fountains are maintained in operation. In the summer, reusable and recyclable water bottles are made available to people who are homeless

and refugees living in precarious circumstances, helping contribute to their safe access to water.

A major contributor to Paris's green transition

Being responsible means thinking at a global scale. As such, Eau de Paris is committed to reducing the social and ecological footprint of its water production and distribution activities. Water is a common resource of vital importance and as an integrated company, Eau de Paris gathers and fosters in-house expertise and innovation. This allows us to continuously adapt to the new needs and challenges of the smart sustainable city as well as to the effects of climate change. Climate disruption forces us to anticipate its potential impacts on water resources in terms of quantity and quality but also on water demand and needs in dense urban areas. These impacts include possible hydric stress increase (when water levels drop in rivers and water basins), frequent periods of drought, average temperatures increase, as well as urban heat islands in dense urban areas where stone buildings tend to absorb and accumulate heat.

By acting beyond its core industrial business to help make Paris and the greater Parisian area resilient and sustainable, Eau de Paris is committed to contribute, at its level, to public urban and environmental policies.

Pioneering catchment protection policies

Protecting underground and river water resources improves the quality of water resources and preserves the landscape and our common natural heritage. Farming has an impact on the aquatic environment when it comes to quality and quantity, as well as biodiversity.

As part of its resource protection policy, Eau de Paris partners with local stakeholders and the Basin Agency (a public entity that manages water with all the stakeholders at the watershed level), to foster more responsible water management by helping redirect farming methods toward a more sustainable and environmentally-friendly model. For example, Eau de Paris buys farmland and makes it available to farmers through cheap rural environmental leases. In exchange, the farmers agree to use organic and sustainable farming methods. This medium and long-term approach allows Eau de Paris to improve source water quality, which will reduce the cost and environmental impact of its treatment.

Promoting biodiversity

As part of its biodiversity policy, Eau de Paris promotes biodiversity and adapts its maintenance practices to the environmental realities of each site, with the help of partner naturalist associations. The areas surrounding water catchments, aqueducts and reservoir roofs are home to a rich and varied fauna and flora. Eau de Paris also works with the City of Paris on projects that support urban agriculture, the greening of buildings, and the development of biodiversity and nature in urban areas.

Committed to climate change mitigation and adaptation

As a major player in the energy transition in the Île-de-France region, Eau de Paris has set itself high goals with a climate-energy plan that calls for reductions in the climate and energy impact of its activities. By 2020, the company aims to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 15 per cent and its energy consumption by 12 per cent and increase its use of renewable energy to 95 per cent of overall energy consumed. The company is also helping reduce CO₂ emissions by producing renewable energy using 11,000m² of photovoltaic panels that generated 17,500 MWh of power in 2018, as well as geothermal generation that produced 15,100 MWh of power².

An exceptional heritage valued at its best

Eau de Paris integrates enhancement of existing systems into its innovation approach, taking the opportunity to define new possibilities based on the resources and infrastructure available. The non-potable water network, a feature specific to Paris, is a mid-nineteenth century legacy of Baron Haussmann's major public works. This second network means that in Paris, the water quality level can be adapted to different uses: drinking water for human consumption, and non-potable water for municipal (watering green spaces, cleaning streets, flushing sewers) or collective uses (watering private green spaces, cleaning the common areas of buildings).

Eau de Paris promotes non-potable water use for less demanding needs to limit the impact on water resources. This is ecologically sound: non-potable water doesn't go through purification treatment, doesn't require chemicals to produce, uses less energy than drinking water production, and is also cheaper to produce.

This network is also being used to experiment with heating and cooling of buildings. Non-potable water is circulated through a plate heat exchanger to capture either its heating or cooling properties and is then returned to the non-potable water network. This technique provides air conditioning for three Parisian buildings, including city hall.

Conclusion

As the leading public drinking water company in France, Eau de Paris is distinguished by its unique supply scheme, its presence as a Paris-based utility that owns and operates installations across a wide geographic area, and its unique hydraulic and industrial heritage. Since its creation, the company has mobilised its internal and intersecting expertise and its strong industrial performance to provide, at its level, sustainable and shared solutions, always ensuring that technology and innovation are at the service of the well-being of Parisians.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Endnotes

- 1 https://budgetparticipatif.paris.fr/bp/jsp/site/Portal.jsp?document_id=1990&portlet_id=158
- 2 http://www.eaudeparis.fr/uploads/tx_edpevents/EDP_RA2018.pdf

This working paper is presented at The Future is Public Conference (December 2019). The draft report “The Future is Public: Towards Democratic Ownership of Public Services” and 15 working papers together form the conference resources. The Transnational Institute and co-publishers will publish the improved report and final papers as a book in 2020. To access the conference resources: futureispublic.org