

# Networking and Intermediarity in the Water Sector

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*Abstract:* - This paper is based on action research conducted during the implementation of the European funded research projects “New Intermediary Services and the Transformation of Urban Water Supply and Wastewater Disposal Systems in Europe” from 2003 to 2005. Through the following up of an informal social network for the sustainable water resource management of a Greek prefecture, originally founded to bring intermediary actors together and on which the researchers and authors were directly involved, a series of intermediary functions of the network *itself* were identified. The final assessment was primarily based on the interviews that took place one and a half-year after the establishment of the network, as the main information source.

*Key-Words:* Networking, Intermediarity, Sustainable Water Resource Management

## 1 Introduction

“It was a warm summer noon, somewhere in a city of central Greece. The only sound breaking the absolute silence was the voice of a man, driving an old van and holding a megaphone. He was driving in the empty streets of the city for hours, urging the citizens to save the most valuable good: water.”

This could have happened in another era, maybe in another Continent. But actually, it took place just few years ago, in the Municipality of Volos in the summer of 2001. This fact broadly depicts the inadequate, sometimes even primitive, water saving practices followed in modern Greece. The communication between the public (the *consumers*) and the water authorities is a one-way deficient process. The central-state merely attempts to inform citizens in periods of crises, leaving no spaces for discussion and active involvement.

In 2004, after few months of preparation and contacts with the local actors, an informal social network emerged in Volos, in an attempt to co-op with the problems of the area and offer solutions to a series of problems related mainly to the actors involved. Our aim as researchers was to create those collective conditions for action research, bringing together actors that hadn't even realized their power at the local level or their potential as “intermediaries”, organizations functioning between the water supplier and the end users. The initial idea was to establish a network, which would act as an innovative organization with the dynamic to challenge – or at least supplement – the traditional mode of water governance. Within this process, our

intermediary role could be characterized as a role of “observers”, “initiators” and bridge builders”.

## 2. Learning Networks spearheading new modes of governance

The interest in the process of networking is constantly growing during the recent years. The need for the establishment of social networks at a local level, able to face environmental problems, is regarded an issue of increasing importance. It has been suggested that learning-oriented networks are able to provide organisations with an action-based platform for sharing insights, knowledge and experience, strengthening policy advocacy and improving service delivery. However, it is a step by step process, which provides the initiative for the participating actors to start thinking.

Several authors and network co-ordinators have provided definitions on what multi-actor networking entails, often depending on what their networks address [1]. What is clear is that networking refers to organisations, institutions and individual actors that join forces around a common concern [2]. Networking, is also about building relationships with other independent actors to (often) share knowledge, goods and experiences and to learn from each other with a common goal in mind [3], [4].

However, networking knowledge for development is not just organising meetings and workshops. Current networking efforts show a variety of sophisticated strategies for sourcing

(identifying and interpreting) and sharing knowledge and experiences, and to systematically learn from it. Information carriers may include (combinations of) web-based, electronic, printed, interpersonal and/or mass media. Content may be activated through information sourcing (identification and interpretation), through interactive web sites, surveys or interviews, or by offering funding or organising writing contests.

In practice, this is done rather by using a combination of such strategies, than bringing selected people together in events like workshops, meetings or conferences. As recent field research indicates, networking knowledge for development produces its most significant results if by means of such strategies, the network develops itself into a space for innovation, experimentation and learning, as a “live” foundation for generating pertinent and viable proposals and policy alternatives [5]. The sum total of learning-oriented networking initiatives in any particular field or region provides civil society with a critical “cortex” that enables it to go beyond the intuitive, beyond individual interests. It helps channelling the knowledge and experience gained through local initiatives, into higher levels of shared understanding and improved policy advocacy. In a way, it provides the meshwork of thinkers and doers that permits civil society to learn from experience, to develop its own knowledge base and to transform it into original policy proposals, without having to adhere to “one-size-fits-all” approaches and solutions.

Existing networks present different sets of objectives, different styles of operation and different degrees of success, maturity and sustainability. Successful networking initiatives are generally characterized by (eventual) clarity of focus, strategic planning of activities, flexible management and participation and a joint vision and commitment of its members. Reliable access to resources that can be dedicated specifically to planning and implementing well-defined network activities proved a key to success as well [6].

### **3 Learning to Collaborate**

The idea of founding a network of multi-level, water-related actors in the Municipality of Volos was born since the early implementation steps of the Intermediaries project. Our aim as researchers was to create those collective conditions for action research, bringing together actors that hadn't even realized their power at the local level or their potential as intermediaries. The initial idea was to

establish a network, which would act as an innovative organization with the dynamic to challenge – or at least supplement – the traditional mode of water governance [7]. Within this process, our intermediary role could be characterized as a role of “observers”, “initiators” and bridge builders”.

At the initial step we identified all the organizations and the institutional actors involved in the area's water sector. Fourteen organizations with different competencies, responsibilities and power were identified and classified in five categories: Local Government, State actors, Private companies, NGO's/civil organizations and Universities/research institutes. These particular actors were included at the research as they represent the local level of governance and they have all adopted and implemented innovative water/wastewater management practices, acting as pioneers in the area. It should be noted that most of these organizations exercise other intermediary functions at an individual level as well. However the conducted research has only focused on the intermediary nature of the network.

Following, based mainly on previous studies and personal contacts, we conducted an initial mapping of the water problems, the water governance structure and the spaces for intermediaries emerged in the Municipality of Volos. This valuable information constituted our background knowledge in order to launch a common dialogue procedure with the identified actors. After our formal invitation, the first meeting took place in February 6<sup>th</sup> 2004, with the participation of all the actors. This meeting opened a broad dialogue on the water/wastewater-related problems that take place in the area. All the participating actors agreed that there was a need for action in order to address the identified problems and accepted to participate in the Water Resources Network of Magnesia Prefecture (DYPOM from its acronym in Greek). DYPOM would act as a discussion forum, aiming to contribute to the dialogue, filling information and awareness gaps. The basic principles of the network's operation are the dissemination of knowledge relevant to sustainable water management to the local society, the enhancement of dialogue and the facilitation of members' learning.

Our research was based on structured and unstructured questionnaires, interviews and the following up of the network's meetings. More specifically, in order to identify the motives to join, the perception of local problems and the expectations from the network, we used a

questionnaire, which was circulated at the early steps of the research. Another series of interviews took place one and a half-year after the establishment of the network in order to measure the learning experience of the network.

#### **4 The Network as a Learning Facilitator**

The fundamental operational principle of DYPOM is the organization of regular meetings, where the members of the network are planning, in a common basis, its actions, further development and strategy. Additionally, DYPOM evaluates the impacts of these actions. The most important benefit gained from these meetings was that actors representing different views came up together for first time and through a process of dialogue have managed to exchange knowledge and different perspectives on the local water management problems. The planned actions of the network are mainly focused on awareness activities (circulation of brochures on water savings), training lectures in selected area's schools, sustainable water management training seminars, and the organization of conferences. More specifically, DYPOM's actions within time dragged DEYAMV, the municipal water utility, to a broad dialogue process with social actors participating in the network. This process has greatly enhanced the knowledge and learning on water/wastewater management related issues, not only of the utility but of all involved actors in the sector. At the short-term term, the beneficiaries are DEYAMV and the other members of DYPOM. The water utility has learned how to face water management problems in a more participatory –and constructive- way. Prior to the establishment of the network, DEYAMV was acting fully independently –to the point of isolation from the society- not taking into account different opinions. Although DEYAMV is still the dominant actor, it now takes under consideration the views of the network's actors on the practices for the sustainable management of the local water resources. Furthermore, the utility is now ready to open up the field of water management to other local actors and –to a certain point- to the general public. The paradigm of the Conference accomplished within the framework of the network's actions is characteristic. The participants put a strong criticism on the way that DEYAMV allocates the water between the different groups of users, something that led DEYAMV to admit openly that more steps should be done to a more efficient allocation of the

local water resources and that a more effective and innovative technology in the distribution network should be embedded. Although a revolutionary step from the Greek context in general, it was still only the first small step towards a more collaborative attitude. It remains to be seen how this will affect water management policies in the long term.

Since the very early stage of the network, the majority of the actors held a positive view concerning DYPOM and the acquisition of learning by the accomplishment of common actions. Those who seem to have learned more are the “core” members that actively and enthusiastically participated in the majority of the network's actions. What the members of the network have learned in this one and a half year is mainly related to the participation process, as dialogue, bargaining and collaborative behavior included principles completely unknown to them. At this point DEMEKAV, Volos Municipal Enterprise for Urban Studies and Development, states [8]: “We have learned to face various co-operation obstacles emerged in a network consisted by actors at different levels of the society and economy. We have learned the way each member of such a network faces the local water management issues. But what is more interesting in this learning process is the detection of the conflict-points and the potential for further cooperation between the members of the network.” Within this framework the members of DYPOM learned how to organize common actions by exchanging their knowledge and previous experience. They are now aware that discussion is required before facing local water problems as this way a wider knowledge and perception of the water problems from a broader perspective can be developed. The environmental NGO PANDOIKO, quotes [8]: “We have learned how heterogeneous actors can co-operate around an emblematic issue. The conclusions of this partnership could prove extremely useful for the near future. We have also gained valuable knowledge concerning the water management problems and the consumers' opinions on these problems. In the long run this knowledge could contribute to a better approach in problem-solving and to more effective water saving practices.”

On the contrary there are members who believe that what they have learned was of very limited practical value. DIKEOMA, an environmental NGO, highlights this different view, stating [8]: “We haven't learned anything really important by our participation in the network. There were no clear benefits either.” However, it should be stressed out that only members who didn't actively participate in

the network's actions since the early stages expressed such negative opinions.

As far as it concerns common benefits that all the "core" members (DEMEKAV, DEYAMV, PANDOIKO and the private companies PATAVALIS and KOUTSOUKOS SA,) acquired, the following joint statement summarize them [8]: "Above anything else, we have learned to discuss and to collaborate. We realized that there is a common ground in every issue, as long as there's the will to find it. Through the network and its actions we have improved not only our knowledge-base but we have also developed a wider perception on the local water management problems." Such benefits, gained from the "action learning", contribute to their willingness to keep on going in a similar participatory way and constitute the driving force for further development of the network. The "core" members seem to be more mature to handle the water management problems after this experience and they are supporting the evolution of the network. Within this framework there is the common belief that the actions as well as their target groups should be re-oriented in order to face more efficient the local water issues and additionally gain competitive advantages in their individual market, environmental or societal sectors.

## 5 Conclusions

It seems though, that the intermediaries in Volos are weak counter-responds to certain needs, partially because of the inability of the utility to meet these needs alone. The driving forces are primarily environmental concerns, market needs and technical / technological support to the utility's actions. Although DYPOM's primary objective was to bring together intermediary actors, it actually functioned as an intermediary -maybe the *strongest* intermediary - itself. A quite successful intermediary actually, placed between users and the municipal authorities. This evolution was due to its autonomy and to its potential value in solving problems, on opening the local market's spaces for new actors and on facilitating sustainable water management practices. However, the intermediarity functions that took place within the network and were gradually identified, present an issue of additional interest.

Such different modes of intermediarity within DYPOM include the bridging process between the much diversified, even conflicting points of view within the network. Through DYPOM, the numerous perspectives and not well established

views (mainly due to the lack of an effective knowledge base and information flow between all involved parties) on the local water problems were effectively bridged and new synthetic perspectives aroused. For example, the local NGO's forwarded on the round table issues like the quality of the drinking water during the summer months; an issue that its existence DEYAMV officially and systematically denied until provided by sound examples by the NGOs during network meetings.

The intermediarity noted between organizations with different resources and influence was another important observation made. Indeed, the network achieved to create those conditions, required for an effective dialogue. Additionally, the knowledge transfer and the overall information flow were enhanced, an issue particularly important especially between organizations with different strategies, aims and objectives and unclear or not established relationships like NGO's, private companies and state actors.

Finally, intermediarity functions were identified between asymmetrical power-relations (in the shadow of hierarchy). DYPOM, which is based on a horizontal structure, partially broke the walls between the dominant actor (the municipal utility) and the other local organizations involved in the water management issues.

So far, the operation of DYPOM hasn't contributed to the creation of new intermediaries in the water sector of the case study area, or to the direct solution of any water related problems in the area. The added value of DYPOM, in this field, concerns only the empowerment of the intermediary nature of those actors participating in the network. The members of DYPOM are working together more often now, while the context of networking is still unknown. However, common actions are conceptions more familiar to them. It is also impressive that all intermediary actors were positive to undertake common action, share opinions and knowledge, built mutual trust and set up a basis for more open-minded approaches to the existent problems, something impossible only few months before the establishment of the Network. However, the quite successful experiment of such a horizontal mode of governance, indicates that the prerequisites for more sound changes in the water governance arrangements of the region have been met.

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