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## Three Faces of the European Union Water Initiative: Promoting the Water Framework Directive or Sustainable Development?

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**ABSTRACT:** The Water Framework Directive (WFD) not only recast water management practices within the European Union (EU); it also opened a new chapter for the EU's external ambitions in the field of water. The central vehicle here is the EU Water Initiative (EUWI), a transnational, multi-actor partnership approach that was established in 2002 to support wider United Nations development goals. The EUWI is underpinned by principles such as river basin planning, resource efficiency, and participation, and the WFD serves as a legal and political template for achieving these aims in interested partner countries. This article analyses the implementation of the Initiative in all five partnerships: Africa, China, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, Latin America, and the Mediterranean; it argues that the Initiative's origins in sustainable development related global debates led to selective interpretations of water management principles in these diverse social, political and ecological contexts. In short, these five partnerships emphasise different aspects of the three pillars of sustainable development, and their respective interpretations result in the different WFD variants outside of Europe. These patterns, we argue, not only reflect contextual differences but also strategic EU and member state foreign policy imperatives that have influenced how the WFD has been promoted globally.

**KEYWORDS:** Water Framework Directive, European Union Water Initiative, integrated water resources management, sustainable development

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### INTRODUCTION

The Water Framework Directive (WFD) is an ambitious piece of European Union (EU) water legislation. Adopted 20 years ago, the Directive requires EU member states to adopt River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) and Programmes of Measures (PoMs) with a view to improving the status of surface, coastal and groundwater resources (Kallis and Butler, 2001; Kaika, 2003). Water authorities are encouraged to involve stakeholders and the wider public in decision-making processes and to organise planning and management activities at hydrological rather than administrative scales (Moss, 2012; Jager et al., 2016).

All EU member states are obliged to implement the WFD. Unless exemptions apply, this includes the so-called outermost regions of the EU, that is, member state territories located at a significant distance from Europe's mainland. The WFD, however, is not legally binding in overseas countries and territories, i.e. jurisdictions that are characterised by a dependent relationship with an EU member state without being part of the EU (Murray, 2012). The WFD is also partly or fully in force in a number of associated countries; in this category are member states of the European Economic Area such as Norway (Hovik and Hanssen, 2016) or EU membership candidates such as Turkey (Demirbilek and Benson, 2019). Taken together, this context both defines and confines the WFD's geographical area of application; various contributions to this Special Issue assess the extent to which the hopes and expectations pinned on the WFD when it was developed two decades ago were justified.

This is, however, just one side of the coin. The WFD not only recast water management discourses and practices within the EU; it also opened a new chapter in the EU's external ambitions in the field of water (Fritsch and Benson, 2019). The central vehicle here is the EU Water Initiative (EUWI).

Established in 2002 under the auspices of the European Commission, the EUWI is a partnership process that brings together EU institutions, member states and non-state actors with a view to coordinating their financial support for policies in developing countries in the field of water. To this end, a network of regional partnerships in Africa, China, the countries of the former Soviet Union, Latin America and the Mediterranean aims to connect European donors, experts and investors with policy makers and the business community in developing countries. Finding effective solutions to water policy problems such as inefficiency, inequity and pollution lies at the heart of the EUWI, and the involvement of civil society and non-profit organisations is key to achieving change that responds to local and regional needs. This chimes with common notions of integrated water resources management (IWRM), and the WFD – as the European embodiment of IWRM – was expected to provide inspiration and, where applicable, serve as a blueprint (European Union, 2005; European Commission, 2012b).

This article contributes to this Special Issue, and to EU water scholarship more broadly, by analysing in depth the global influence that the EUWI has had in promoting IWRM policy principles and the extent to which the lessons taught and learned in the process reflect the spirit of the WFD. European institutions were quick to associate the EUWI with ongoing initiatives to promote sustainable development globally; there has not, however, been sufficient exploration in current studies of the extent to which the promotion of WFD water management principles and the advancement of sustainable development constitute – conceptually or practically – conflicting objectives in an EUWI context. This article therefore asks how the EUWI sought to support sustainable development, what role the WFD plays here in promoting this agenda, and what factors have shaped the EUWI's capacity for promoting sustainable development globally. Research into this issue could be considered timely due to the promotion of IWRM as a mechanism for global sustainable water management in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

To this end, we look at all five EUWI partnerships: Africa, China, the countries of the former Soviet Union, Latin America, and the Mediterranean. We do not, however, report on collaborative platforms set up outside the formal structure of the EUWI such as the EU India Water Partnership, nor do we examine less structured attempts of countries outside Europe to learn from European experiences in the field of water (Heldt et al., 2017).

Scholarly interest in the EUWI has been scarce and a close reading of available research reveals several shortcomings. First, many studies were published in the early years of the Initiative (Partzsch, 2007, 2008, 2009; Stewart and Gray, 2006, 2009), with only one of more recent vintage (Fritsch et al., 2017). Second, there are now five regional partnerships, but there is only one text, published by Partzsch in 2007, that explores all four of the partnerships that existed at that time, and its key output, a monograph, is not available in the English language. Stewart and Gray (2006, 2009) only look at Africa, while Fritsch et al. (2017) study just two regions; the China Europe Water Platform (CEWP) has until now not been analysed

at all. Finally, authors observe notable differences between regional partnerships; however, previous works underestimate the degree of variance in EUWI partnerships and authors are too quick to attribute unique characteristics to local and regional contexts rather than to shifts in EU policy priorities.

In response, we argue that the origins of the Initiative in global debates on sustainable development have led to selective readings of WFD principles in diverse ecological, political and social settings. Regional partnerships emphasise different aspects of sustainable development, resulting in three faces of the EUWI: an economic one with a focus on investments in water technology; a social one that prioritises questions of access, equity and participation; and an environmental one that comes closest to current applications of the WFD in Europe. While contextual conditions are important, they only partially explain the above patterns; we find that EU and member state foreign policy imperatives are equally, if not more, important. We unpack these imperatives and explore how strategic considerations have influenced the approach taken by European actors when it comes to promoting aspects of IWRM and the WFD in different parts in the world.

The article proceeds as follows. We first situate the EUWI in a conceptual discussion of sustainable development, principles of IWRM, and the ecological goals of the WFD. We then introduce our data and methods. The empirical part of this article then presents case studies of all five regional EUWI partnerships. Our final section compares these cases and discusses avenues for future research.

### **SITUATING THE EUWI: THE WFD, IWRM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Our article explores the degree to which the WFD, via the EUWI, has influenced water policies outside Europe. This raises a number of conceptual questions. While the Directive is widely conceived of as being the most prominent embodiment of IWRM in Europe (Griffiths, 2002; Grimeaud, 2004; Lubell and Edelenbos, 2013), the EUWI seems to also represent a pan-European attempt to support sustainable development in the field of water (Partzsch, 2007). We argue that forcing these four policies and political discourses – EUWI, IWRM, sustainable development and the WFD – into one frame(work) in the hope that this would result in a harmonious and appealing piece of art is a testing enterprise.

#### **EUWI**

Let us first look at the EUWI. The origins of the Initiative have been described elsewhere (Partzsch, 2007). Prompted by the 2000 UN Millennium Summit and the 2002 UN World Summit, the EUWI initially aimed to coordinate ongoing – and to generate new – EU and member state funding streams in relation to development aid in the field of water. Policy documents published from this period emphasise the commitment to sustainable approaches to water management and to sustainable development as a general political vision (European Commission, 2002a, 2002b, 2003c). This "strategic approach for sustainable access to and management of water resources integrates sectoral and cross-cutting issues and encompasses all aspect [sic] of sustainability", explicitly bringing together "economic, social and environmental sustainability" (European Commission, 2002b: 3). Practically, this would suggest working towards clean water and functional aquatic ecosystems, adopting participatory decision-making arrangements, gender justice and a fair distribution of water, and regulating economies such that societal welfare is maximised without compromising the natural environment.

#### **IWRM**

By 'integrating sectoral and cross-cutting issues' the EUWI also links to IWRM principles. Recognising the importance of IWRM as a globally leading paradigm to govern water resources, the EU leaves no doubt that the integrated management of our aquatic environment is key to pursuing the above-mentioned sustainability agenda (European Commission, 2002b: 15-18).

Since its inception, IWRM has taken several twists and turns and it appears currently to be a multifaceted phenomenon (Biswas, 2004; Allan, 2012; Grigg, 2014). Despite its fluidity, however, some common features prevail; a typical IWRM laundry list regularly includes ambitious water policy goals, water supply and sewerage mechanisms, equitable access to water, water pricing, innovative governance arrangements, public participation, and water management at hydrological scales (Savenije and Van der Zaag, 2008; Lubell and Edelenbos, 2013). The idea of 'integration' serves as an umbrella here, promoting the insight that the joint consideration of multiple water functions, uses and government authorities across levels and scales is likely to better achieve the move away from established techno-fix solutions towards more progressive approaches (Wolsink, 2006; Molle, 2009).

In this sense, IWRM may be compatible with popular notions of sustainable development (GWP-TAC, 2000; Allan, 2012; Varis et al., 2014; Benson et al., 2015), although this is certainly not the only feasible reading (Biswas, 2004; Mukhtarov and Gerlak, 2014). Perhaps to ensure that mutually compatible understandings of IWRM and sustainability come to mind, early EU documents prefer to speak of "sustainable integrated water resources management" (European Commission, 2002b: 3), thereby providing a more specific link between IWRM and the EUWI's origins in sustainable development.

## WFD

The more troublesome question, however, concerns the potential role of the WFD in the EUWI. There is no denying the centrality of the Directive: all EU policy documents related to the design and establishment of the Initiative mention the WFD as a pioneering statute in the field of water that may serve as an example, if not a template (European Commission, 2002a, 2002b: 14, 2003c: 5; European Union, 2005: 5). The extent to which, and how, the WFD could really be transferred to EUWI partner countries, however, is not elaborated upon in these publications; they tend, rather, to namecheck the Directive at convenient places throughout the texts but remain silent about its scope of application in overseas contexts.

This is not a trivial matter. True, the WFD possesses many features of IWRM. The Directive aims to achieve ambitious water quality goals and contains provisions – although less forceful – for regulating water quantity. The WFD also obliges member states to manage water at hydrological scales, calls for public participation in water planning and management, and promotes the polluter-pays principle; we therefore share the sentiments of many colleagues that the WFD is the prime legal instrument in Europe for implementing IWRM principles (Griffiths, 2002; Grimeaud, 2004; Lubell and Edelenbos, 2013). At the same time, however, the Directive represents a somewhat eclectic approach to integrated management. This is because water quality considerations dominate this statute, and most IWRM-style elements of the Directive are subordinate to the achievement of good water status. To illustrate this point, mainstream IWRM approaches promote the involvement of non-state actors as a tool to enable policy integration; however, they also articulate a link between public participation and water justice, equity and legitimacy. The WFD, in contrast, advances participatory governance arrangements in an attempt to improve the quality of the aquatic environment, i.e. policy effectiveness (European Commission, 2003a; Newig and Koontz, 2013). Some principles typically associated with IWRM are missing entirely; this includes gender equality, equal access to water, and the reduction of poverty (Rahaman et al., 2004). Arguably, the WFD reflects an understanding of IWRM that is significantly narrower than the notion of 'sustainable IWRM' found in EUWI policy documents.

We observe a similar pattern regarding the link between sustainable development and the WFD. The Directive mentions the terms 'sustainable' and 'sustainability' 13 times, typically in the context of 'sustainable water use' or in phrases such as 'sustainable water management'; however, in line with the overall ambition of the WFD – good water status, a metric that describes biological, chemical and geomorphological qualities of water – these references describe a commitment to environmental sustainability (WFD Preamble 41). There is no indication that the Directive aims to maximise notions of

economic or social sustainability; in fact, some elements of the WFD may directly contradict such notions, for instance the commodification of water through market-based water pricing mechanisms. Water quantity features in a groundwater context but, again, the overall idea is to benefit aquatic ecosystems rather than human welfare. In short, the WFD was designed as an environmental policy directive. It was never meant to be something else. It would therefore be misleading to promote the WFD as a tool to advance a more extensive understanding of sustainability. Earlier writings have come to similar conclusions (Partzsch, 2007).

Consequently, the potential to promote sustainable water policy principles through the WFD was limited from the outset. The Directive is an ambitious piece of legislation that deserves to be taken seriously in jurisdictions overseas, but it only covers a part of what the EUWI aims to achieve. This is, however, not the only challenge that the EUWI faces when it comes to its thematic priorities.

### **Flexibility**

The other constraint is related to the inbuilt flexibility of the EUWI. Yes, the Initiative breathes the spirit of sustainable development; however, the EUWI does not come with a legally binding mandate to stay on track here, and no mechanism except political good will is in place to ensure that implementation reflects the visionary aspirations articulated back in 2002. The key objectives of the Water Initiative, for example, provide a great degree of freedom with regard to building water partnerships. The objectives mainly describe managerial activities, and it is somewhat ironic that the only mention of the term 'sustainable' refers to maintaining a steady cash flow:

Strengthening political commitment to action and innovation-oriented partnership. Promoting better water governance, capacity building and awareness. Improving the efficiency and effectiveness of water management through multi-stakeholder dialogue and co-ordination. Strengthening co-operation by promoting river-basin approaches in national and transboundary waters. Identifying additional sources of funding and mechanisms to ensure sustainable financing (European Commission, 2003c: 23).

These objectives do not undermine the original agenda of the EUWI; however, they remind us that the EUWI is a political strategy that gives participating actors opportunities to pursue their interests in line with the politics of the day, here referring to the European institutions and member states taking the lead in specific partnership programmes, but also government actors in partner countries.

The EUWI, moreover, does not operate in a political vacuum. The Initiative is embedded in a wide range of activities in the space of EU development cooperation that may differ by region but, by and large, follow EU development and foreign policy imperatives that are larger than the EUWI. The environment certainly plays a role but is likely to be overshadowed by economic and social considerations. The more the structural confines of EU development aid and the interests involved lead the EUWI away from environmental sustainability goals, the less prominent the contribution of the WFD will be to water policy change in EUWI partner countries.

The Initiative's partnership approach likewise emphasises the importance of EUWI target countries outside Europe for the joint identification of policy priorities in specific regional contexts. Collaborative governance arrangements are useful for enhancing the legitimacy of the EUWI and for securing ownership for measures and projects; however, power transfer in participatory settings, by implication, means loss of control (Arnstein, 1969). The joint development of operational objectives in regional partnerships may therefore result in policy programmes that are only partially compatible with notions of sustainable development or, specifically, environmental sustainability, again reducing the potentially transformative power of the WFD in EUWI activities.

## Implications

The EUWI, consequently, may have many faces. In this article, we use the three pillars of sustainability – economic, environmental and social – to describe three ideal interpretations of the Initiative; the WFD is likely to take a prominent role in only the environmental one. This means that we expect a high degree of fragmentation in terms of policy contents; this opens the door to institutional fragmentation, that is, scenarios where regional partnerships begin to emancipate themselves from the EUWI secretariat in Brussels and the vision of the EUWI that the secretariat represents (for a conceptual discussion, see Zelli and van Asselt, 2013.) To be clear, this will not be the focus of our article – we are interested primarily in the forms and contents of EUWI partnerships and the role that the WFD plays therein – but this thought will be important during the later stages of our analysis.

The extent to which the WFD has actually informed EUWI activities is an empirical question. We will explore this question in the remainder of the article.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA

Our research encompasses a multi-case comparative design focusing on five EUWI variants: Africa, China, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, Latin America, and the Mediterranean. The EU-India Water Partnership is not formally a part of the EUWI and was therefore disregarded in the context of this article.

Our analytical framework is informed by the expectation that the EUWI aims, *inter alia*, to transfer WFD water management principles and institutional arrangements to regions outside Europe. Based on a thorough reading of both the WFD-related social science literature (Boeuf and Fritsch, 2016) and of the Directive itself, we developed a list of items that could potentially be the object of policy transfer; these include: a set of ambitious and conceptually sophisticated environmental objectives (see Article 4, WFD), transparent mechanisms to justify the departure from those objectives (Article 4), the establishment of river basin districts and the pursuit of management activities at ecological scales (Article 3), the preparation of RBMPs (Article 13) and more specific PoMs (Article 11), public consultation and active involvement in planning and management activities (Article 14), and systematic attempts, similar to those of the Common Implementation Strategy, to reflect on and improve planning and management activities. Needless to say, we expected terminologies to be different across regions. We were looking for attempts to do justice to the spirit of the Directive; this included, for instance, measures to achieve policy integration beyond the water sector. We also aimed to distinguish different degrees of legal compulsion in the application of these arrangements and principles.

Scholars studying the implementation of the WFD within the EU may find that the above framework lacks detail; however, we considered it to be appropriate. This is, as we discovered during our research, because there were only two EUWI partnerships defined by genuine intentions to transfer key principles of the WFD; furthermore, the progress made in these two partnerships suggested that it would be more worthwhile to present findings in terms of transfer intentions rather than transfer outcomes. (We will report on these two partnerships later.)

This led us to revisit the ambition of the project with a view to exploring the aims and objectives of EUWI partnerships more broadly and the limited role of the WFD therein. We did not use an analytical framework upfront as we considered that this would restrict us in our analysis; instead, we systematised our findings *ex-post*. The underlying assumption was that water is a natural resource but that this does not necessarily mean that water policy is always environmental policy. Water can be a common denominator in a range of different policy areas; while this may include environmental and ecological considerations, activities may also relate to social justice, welfare and health, or to economic growth and trade. We later relate these major issue areas to the three pillars of sustainable development in order to highlight the different priorities taken in EUWI partnerships.

Qualitative data was derived from an analysis of 237 official EU, EUWI and national government documents; these included annual implementation reports, meeting minutes, conference presentations and webpages.

This data was triangulated with 32 semi-structured interviews with relevant policy actors from EU, international, and global levels; these actors included European Commission officials from the Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, from EU member states and EUWI partner countries, plus a variety of non-governmental actors in Europe and the EUWI regions. Included also were consultants who have advised the EUWI and the European Commission as well as national governments and sectoral business associations. Interviews were carried out in person, on the phone, and via Skype.

We used NVivo to code a subset of policy documents, particularly for teasing out the EUWI's relationship to concepts such as IWRM or sustainable development. The documentary evidence and the interviews were then combined to construct the case study analyses presented in the remainder of the article.

### **AFRICA WORKING GROUP**

The original focus of the EUWI was Africa. During the period of the EUWI's formation in 2002, Africa was falling short of meeting the Millennium Development Goal to reduce by half the proportion of its population lacking sustainable access to basic sanitation and safe drinking water by 2015 (World Health Organization and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 2004). The Africa Working Group (AWG) – the EUWI's regional partnership in Africa – was established to coordinate and implement the 2002 EU-Africa Strategic Partnership on Water Affairs and Sanitation, which aimed at helping countries in the region to achieve this Millennium Development Goal (European Commission, 2003c).

This points us to an important insight. The origins of the EUWI cannot be divorced from the paramount interest of the EU and the member states in contributing to poverty reduction and welfare in Africa. These priorities are documented in a string of international agreements and EU policies, from the establishment of the European Development Fund in 1957 to the Yaoundé and Lomé Conventions of the 1960s and 1970s, the 2000 Cotonou Agreement, the 2000 Millennium Development Goals, the 2005 European Consensus on Development, and, more recently, the 2007 Joint Africa-EU Strategy (Carbone, 2007). Overall, these policies advance a social understanding of sustainability (also see European Parliament, 2017). This is not the place to discuss the motives and incentives behind EU development aid (again, see Carbone, 2007); what matters is that the EUWI's partnership with Africa reflects, and operates within, political discourses that aim to pursue a development agenda. A simple indicator provides a reason: the vast majority of all EU policy documents about the EUWI were drafted by the European Commission's Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development.

These thematic priorities became more evident as the African EUWI partnership evolved over time. The AWG's key implementing instrument was high-level dialogues between the European Commission, EU member states and the African Minister's Council on Water, whose aim was the promotion of a water, sanitation and health agenda. This included raising awareness, attracting donors, and coordinating the myriad of EU programmes in the field of water-related development aid (European Commission, 2006b, 2009, 2012b). An Africa-EU Statement on Sanitation was issued in 2008 and subsequently endorsed by African Union leaders; they, in turn, agreed to the eThekweni Declaration and its associated AfricaSan Action Plan in 2008 (European Commission, 2012b). Under the eThekweni Declaration, signed by 32 African countries, national governments pledged to work towards the achievement of the sanitation targets of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 (African Union, 2008). To this end, the Africa Caribbean Pacific-European Union (ACP-EU) Water Facility, set up in 2004, helped finance investments for sanitation and supply in Africa, the Caribbean and Pacific nations (European Commission, 2004a).



Despite these evidently urgent priorities, sanitation and supply constituted only one component of the AWG's activities. As we have shown earlier, the EUWI's political agenda articulated a broader vision of sustainable development, one that would include economic and environmental considerations (European Commission, 2002a, 2002b, 2003c). Tackling questions of transboundary water management, the AWG's second component reflects this wider agenda of the EUWI.

This second component aimed, through the creation of national-level country dialogues, to transfer WFD elements wholesale from the EU to African countries (European Commission, 2006b); this included river basin management at ecological scales as well as public participation. Results of this transfer strategy proved limited, mainly due to mismatches between the technical demands of WFD implementation and the domestic resources available to meet its requirements (Matz and Lofgren, 2008). By 2007, the country dialogue approach had been effectively wound down in favour of the aforementioned development theme; the transfer of IWRM to African states, however, remained on the agenda, although the WFD is not explicitly mentioned and follow-up activities are scarce (African Minister's Council on Water, 2012; European Commission, 2015).

Since then, support by African states for the transfer of IWRM norms has been to an extent superseded by the AWG's interest in promoting the water-energy-food nexus, a supposedly holistic developmental concept that is based on integrating water management objectives with those for agricultural and energy production (Benson et al., 2015; European Commission, 2016). This support should not, however, be interpreted as a concession to those aiming to bring back notions of environmental sustainability; on the contrary, the focus on food and energy provision merely suggests an extension and reformulation of the AWG's social sustainability priorities.

These priorities also remained in place when the EUWI ceased to exist in 2016 as an overarching process for coordinating EU development aid in the field of water. The question of why this happened is beyond the scope of this article; that said, some partnerships, specifically those in Latin America and the Mediterranean, were discontinued without replacement or follow-up initiatives, while others – the African and the Eastern European EUWI partnerships – resumed in the format of a funded EU programme. Only the newest partnership, the China Europe Water Platform, proceeded without change. In the context of Africa, this follow-up programme is the Africa-EU Water Partnership Project (AEWPP).

It is too early to assess what difference the new format makes. These differences may occur in terms of mission, funding and control; that is, focused objectives, guaranteed funding and more control with the AEWPP, versus ambiguous objectives, less secure funding, and less control for the EU due to its partnership approach, with the AWG. What can be said is that the AEWPP, coordinated by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, has not deviated from the direction taken by the AWG. The AEWPP focuses on the Sustainable Development Goals and the Africa Water Vision for 2025, reflecting the values expressed in the 2014 Africa-EU Summit Declaration and Road Map; some entrepreneurial language, however, has crept into recent AEWPP statements which goes beyond the terminology normally used by the AWG:

The project will continue to provide a platform for dialogue and coordination but also adds a component directly aimed at catalysing finance for investment in water infrastructure in Africa. This component aims at filling the gap between project ideas or ready-designed projects and bankable financing proposals, and will identify and select a few project proposals, work them into bankable business cases and facilitate access to capital investment, possibly leveraged by EU blending and grants (Stockholm International Water Institute, no date)

As we will demonstrate in the next section, this rhetoric and thinking is a typical feature of the EUWI's regional platform in China. For the time being, we do not conclude that the African water partnership has made a programmatic U-turn; instead, we maintain that the EUWI partnership in Africa has shown and, for the moment at least, shows a face that emphasises the tenets of social sustainability.

## CHINA EUROPE WATER PLATFORM

The China Europe Water Platform (CEWP) is the last partnership established under the EUWI label; it has been in operation since 2012 (China Europe Water Platform, 2014). The differences between it and the Africa partnership could not be greater.

Supported by a secretariat in China and one in Europe, the CEWP aims to address four themes: energy security, river basin management, rural water and food security, and urbanisation. Within this framework, partner countries administer co-led programmes, for instance on flooding (with the Netherlands), groundwater (with Denmark) or hydropower (with Austria). The three cross-cutting themes of business, governance and research, however, are more important to understanding the unique nature of the CEWP (European Commission, 2014, 2016).

In line with the EUWI's philosophy, the CEWP does not provide any direct funding; in contrast to other regional platforms, however, the available budget for water-related EU development aid is small in China. The number of EUWI-funded projects that require coordination is therefore relatively limited as well; instead, CEWP partner countries participate at their own expense and identify new funding sources (China Europe Water Platform, 2014). This arrangement requires substantial effort. It not only delayed a timely take-off; it also explains the unique profile that the CEWP has developed over time. In the absence of alternative funding sources, CEWP activities focus first and foremost on the cross-cutting theme of business as this is where partner countries see opportunities for funding and collaboration. Not surprisingly, therefore, many CEWP activities reflect the interests of the business community rather than a transformative sustainability agenda. If at all, the economic pillar of sustainability would come into play whereby the CEWP's Business and Innovation Program serves to enable market access for products and services, initiates business collaborations, and offers market analyses. To illustrate this point, the Horizon 2020-funded EU project 'PIANO' (Policies, Innovation, and Network for enhancing Opportunities for China-Europe water cooperation), associated with the CEWP's 'research' theme, did not study environmental or social aspects of water, but rather prepared business reports (see, for instance, Spooner, 2018). Participation in conferences, expos and trade fairs plays a major role in the CEWP; to this end, it collaborates closely with the EU Chamber of Commerce, the EU Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Centre, and the China Intellectual Property Rights Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Helpdesk (China Europe Water Platform, 2015). Consultancy and expertise are an emerging sector, but interview evidence suggests that technology and engineering solutions are more important. Due to the lack of multilateral funding, CEWP projects tend to be bilateral and represent the interests of the engineering- and technology-heavy economies of the EU such as Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden (European Commission, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016).

All this activity is well in line with the overall relationship that China and the EU have developed over the past four decades. In the 1985 Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation Between the European Economic Community and the People's Republic of China and the 2013 EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, the European Commission summarised the nature of this relationship in numerous official statements (European Commission, 1995, 2001, 2008b). Identifying a 'comprehensive' (1998), a 'maturing' (2003b) and finally a 'close' partnership (2006a), EU-China relations are chiefly defined in economic terms (Smith, 2016; Freeman, 2017), and the EU has become China's biggest trading partner (Taneja, 2010).

The EU has always attempted to supplement improved trade relations with enhanced political influence (Freeman, 2017); this has been unsuccessful, however, as China seems to put a high premium on averting "unsolicited advice" (Chang and Pieke, 2018: 325) and on developing a partnership that leaves "no room (...) for one side to 'socialize' the other into anything" (Taneja, 2010: 378). Economic and political questions are therefore kept separate in China-EU relations (Maher, 2016; Michalski and Nilsson, 2019). This has implications for another cross-cutting theme of the CEWP, namely 'governance'.

Arguably, the implementation of IWRM principles requires both legislative measures and governance reforms. We do not see many of these in China and, in fact, we note few attempts to push such an agenda within the context of the CEWP. The incentives for European participants are obvious: "By globalizing EU norms, such as environmental standards, the EU could create a level playing field for European business and other nonmarket social values" (Chen, 2016: 779). We offer three explanations.

First, the CEWP's financial architecture prioritises marketable innovations, services and technologies, and there is no genuine business case for the adoption of IWRM reforms. One may ask – in light of the wider sustainable development context in which the EUWI operates – to what extent the business-friendly and technology-oriented approach taken by the CEWP is at all compatible with notions of environmental sustainability. The tension between the interests of a few EU member states and those aiming to promote the public interest – that is, integrated and sustainable water management – is not unique; in fact, it seems to be a common feature of the EU's relations with China (Smith, 2016).

The second explanation may be that some IWRM principles are simply hard to sell on the Chinese market of ideas; this is particularly true if they contradict the present hierarchical-governance model, which applies in the case of public participation and bids to recalibrate the balance of power on the centralisation – decentralisation scale (Deng et al., 2016; see also Li and Wagenaar, 2019).

Third, three EU-funded programmes have already dealt with questions of IWRM in China. The Europe-China River Basin Management Programme (2007-2012, i.e. prior to the establishment of the CEWP) was aimed at advancing WFD water management principles in China; key to the programme were joint research projects and training sessions in areas as diverse as climate change adaptation, pollution load modelling, and monitoring (EUWI, 2012). The EU-China Environmental Governance Programme (2011-2015) promoted environmental rights as enshrined in the 1998 Aarhus Convention, specifically the provision of environmental information, public participation, and access to justice in environmental decision-making. Lastly, the EU-China Environmental Sustainability Programme (2013-2016) tackled various environmental problems including water management and heavy metal water pollution. These programmes had two things in common: first, unlike the CEWP, they came with their own funding and were therefore independent from industry and the politics of the day; second, their status as programmes ensured a focus on, and commitment to, previously agreed objectives, while the CEWP, in contrast, tends to fly high and to have vague goals that fail to provide direction (Yang, 2017). While these were promising conditions for water policy transfer, environmental sustainability seems to have a low priority in the Chinese water sector compared to water supply and sewerage, water security and flood control, and rapid urbanisation. The current focus on water infrastructure and technology certainly reflects China's perspectives on the matter; however, it also perpetuates a development which started with the aforementioned (pre-CEWP) EU-China River Basin Management Programme, where European partners inventively linked the promotion of WFD principles to the export of the latest engineering solutions ("It was about selling the kit, selling the technology", one interviewee said). Chinese water managers still express a genuine, if somewhat uncommitted, interest in the WFD; there is little evidence, however, that the WFD has so far made inroads into China's water management (Deng et al., 2016). What remains is the sympathy for technology and infrastructure that has informed the CEWP since its establishment in 2012 when the EU-China River Basin Management Programme came to an end. Interview evidence suggests, moreover, that institutional reforms are likely to fall on deaf ears if found incompatible with current governance principles in China; there is also a general reluctance to accept Western comment on highly political questions. Apart from the funding situation which sets the CEWP on a business trajectory, this resistance to change and reluctance to accept Western comment may explain why IWRM/WFD questions of governance and institutions feature less prominently in the CEWP.

Overall, economic considerations dominate this partnership. This is not to say that no work is being done that could be interpreted as pursuing environmental or social sustainability goals – it is! CEWP workshops and annual meetings provide opportunities for academic exchange and for learning from best practices, and the importance of environmental sustainability is emphasised; other activities may help

tackle water supply and sanitation problems, thereby entering the realm of social sustainability (European Commission, 2013, 2014, 2016). Generally, however, the extent to which such activities result in lasting change depends on the degree to which they are compatible with a business agenda.

The future may look somewhat different, though. The Turku Declaration and the subsequent report on water sustainability (China Europe Water Platform, 2017, 2018) brought a more balanced understanding of sustainability back into the discussion. It is too early to assess the impact of these documents, but it may well be that the WFD gets a second chance in China soon.

### **EUWI EASTERN EUROPE, CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA**

The EUWI's partnership for Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia (EUWI-EECCA), established in 2003, brings together 12 countries from the former Soviet Union. It was primarily composed of national government authorities, the European Commission and EU member state representatives, as well as strategic partners such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, and international financial institutions (European Commission, 2007a, 2011). In contrast to Africa and China, this regional partnership was consistently predicated upon a water policy reform agenda rather than economic and social development priorities (Fritsch et al., 2017); this is because the activities of the Eastern water partnership are closely linked to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).

The ENP emerged in the early 2000s in response to the paradox that while the EU is unable to enlarge infinitely, it takes an interest in a safe and stable external environment. This objective can supposedly be best achieved if the countries constituting the EU's external environment approximate, if not adopt, the institutional structures, legislative frameworks, and political values of the EU and its member states (Bengtsson, 2008; Casier, 2011). Typically formalised through an association agreement, neighbouring countries may expect a privileged relationship that paves the way for access to the common market, travel and migration arrangements, EU funding in areas such as education and research, and so on. Although countries involved may envisage an even deeper form of integration – EU membership – this is not a realistic option officially or, at the time of writing, practically (Lavenex, 2004; Gstöhl, 2015).

In return, neighbouring countries pledge themselves to respecting the values expressed in the 1993 Copenhagen criteria, which was initially developed in an EU enlargement context; these values include civil liberties, democracy and the rule of law. More importantly, privileged relations via the ENP require external countries to partly or fully adopt the *acquis communautaire*, in other words to harmonise their domestic legislation with EU law. Whether such a norm transfer is the result of conditionality or EU-facilitated discourse and socialisation is irrelevant in the context of this article (but see Johansson-Nogués, 2007; Lavenex, 2008; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2009); what matters is that the Eastern water partnership operates in the shadow of the ENP and that this influences its political priorities.

EU water legislation is broad in terms of scope and intent; it tends, however, to reflect the tenet of environmental sustainability. Apart from the 2007 Floods Directive, there are no major statutes in the field of water that could meaningfully be related to notions of economic or social sustainability; in other words, European water law is environmental law. Given that the Eastern water partnership explicitly aims to support the European Neighbourhood Policy (European Commission, 2012b; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2017), this partnership must prioritise the transfer of EU water legislation, in particular its flagship policy, the WFD. The Eastern water partnership has therefore developed an environmental rather than an economic or social profile.

In order to facilitate the transfer of WFD principles to Eastern Partnership countries, the EUWI-EECCA established a regular forum for exchange and learning, the Joint WFD/EUWI Process. This mechanism, essentially, copied the Common Implementation Strategy, an intra-European initiative led by the

European Commission to 1) test WFD principles in pilot basins, 2) share best practices, and 3) develop implementation guidelines. The Joint Process, however, was not only an EECCA activity; as its name suggests, it encouraged learning both between EECCA countries and from EU member states and, to this end, access was given to events organised and data prepared in the context of the Common Implementation Strategy (European Commission, 2004b). Importantly, the transboundary – that is to say international – management of river basins played a major role here; this goes beyond WFD requirements which encourage, but do not make legally binding, the joint management of water bodies across international borders (in the EU, management at hydrological scales is required within national borders only) (European Commission, 2007a, 2008a).

While the Joint Process operated supranationally, the transposition and implementation of EU water policy norms was supposed to take place in national policy dialogues; however, one of the first conclusions that these dialogues established was that, due to decades of underinvestment in national water infrastructure during the Soviet era, EECCA countries were hardly able to comply with the technical requirements of the WFD model in their entirety (European Commission, 2010a). During this time, the majority of states had little intention of immediate EU accession and also failed to see the benefits of the newly emerging European Neighbourhood Policy. Many EECCA countries, instead, preferred to adopt IWRM principles that were downloaded from the international arena via the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe.

Consequently, the close alignment of the WFD with EECCA national policies that was originally anticipated by the EU (European Commission, 2012b), in reality proved to be unrealistic. A patchwork of national water policies emerged across the region as national policy dialogues worked to adopt these composite policy packages of reforms (for evidence, see the string of EUWI annual reports published by the European Commission, 2010a, 2013, 2016). In 2012, for example, in order to inform adoption of new national water legislation, Georgia conducted a background study to assess the compatibility with the WFD of its existing legal and institutional framework for water (European Commission, 2013). Although the WFD then became a significant source of inspiration in the drafting process, the final Water Act was more influenced by IWRM principles promoted by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2013). Similarly, the 2012 Azerbaijan draft Water Strategy was aimed primarily at the national adoption of IWRM, while incorporating elements from both the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)'s Water Convention and the WFD (European Commission, 2013).

About five years ago, however, things changed. In contrast to some of the other EUWI partnerships that were silently phased out in 2016, the EUWI-EECCA was reconstituted as the EUWI Plus for Eastern Partnership Countries (EUWI+). Three features distinguish the EUWI+ from its predecessor. First, the EUWI+ is an EU programme (2016-2020) rather than a platform and it comes with clearly defined objectives and a greater sense of focus; second, the effectiveness of EUWI+ activities is enhanced by guaranteed funding – the €24.8 million granted by the EU, Austria and France; third, the EUWI+ only encompasses Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, i.e. the six countries of the Eastern Partnership, a component of the ENP. The EU's collaboration with Russia and the countries of Central Asia will be continued in alternative formats, the precise shape of which is still in flux.

The EUWI+ still maintains a combination of supranational activities and national policy dialogues. The overall aim is to support the implementation of IWRM principles whereby "the Water Framework Directive will serve as benchmark for actions" (European Commission, 2017: 40). Drawing on the experiences of EU member states during the first WFD management cycle (2009-2015), the programme assists EUWI+ partner countries throughout all stages of the cycle, including law-making, establishing transboundary river basins, drafting and implementing management plans, involving the public, and also monitoring and data management; technical support, institutional twinning, and awareness-raising measures are further elements of the EUWI+ (Environment Agency Austria and International Office for Water, 2018).

It is too early to assess the precise impacts of the EUWI+; it is certainly fair, however, to say that the Eastern EUWI partnership has developed a distinct profile that emphasises environmental protection rather than economic or social concerns. In doing so, it puts a high premium on the WFD as a blueprint for EUWI policy transfer.

## **EUWI MEDITERRANEAN**

The EUWI partnership for the Mediterranean (MED-EUWI) shares a number of features with the Eastern regional partnership; this is particularly the case with regard to structure and initial ambitions. Established in 2003, it was led by Greece and supported by the Mediterranean office of the Global Water Partnership. The MED-EUWI involved 16 countries in North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Southeastern Europe. Until their EU membership bids were successful, Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania were also members of the partnership (European Commission, 2006b, 2012a, 2016).

Two major themes defined the work of the Mediterranean partnership: IWRM, on the one hand, and water scarcity, sanitation and supply on the other (European Commission, 2012b). The importance of tackling problems related to access, hygiene and sewerage cannot be underestimated and we do not want to repeat ourselves here as the situation in the Mediterranean is fairly similar to that of sub-Saharan Africa, at least so far as the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean and Northern Africa are concerned (World Bank, 2007). As was the case in sub-Saharan Africa, the MED-EUWI relied on national policy dialogues and specialist workshops to raise awareness, identify donors, share best practices, and transfer technology. These activities accounted for a large share of the attention, funds and time dedicated in the region, and they did so for good reasons (European Commission, 2007a, 2011, 2016). From a European perspective, this thematic focus can be traced back to the EU's overall development agenda which effectively links to attempts to stabilise the region, manage migration, enhance welfare, and improve trade relations, all pursued in the context of the ENP and beyond (Holland, 2002; Philippart, 2003; Bicchi, 2010).

Let us now move to IWRM as approached by the Mediterranean section of the Joint WFD/EUWI Process. Building on the Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreements of the 1990s, the ENP established a framework for collaboration with the countries of the region more than 15 years ago (Gstöhl, 2015). The Joint Process in the Mediterranean aims, as in EECCA, to support the harmonisation of water legislation. It also relies on the same set of instruments: pilot river basins (in Lebanon and Morocco), conferences and workshops to learn from best practices, and support in legal transposition. The Joint Process is structured by six working groups, on groundwater, monitoring, rural problems, transboundary management, wastewater and water scarcity. The Euro-Mediterranean Information System on Know-How in the Water Sector (EMWIS), an electronic communication interface, helps share data, documents and information (European Commission, 2004b, 2010b).

This is not to suggest, however, that the MED-EUWI was set on the same trajectory; in fact, three factors distinguish the MED-EUWI from its Eastern counterpart.

First, the WFD has a reputation for representing the water priorities of countries in Northwestern Europe. It promotes governance concepts borrowed from political systems from this part of the world and tackles a problem – water pollution – that receives greater attention in this region; in contrast, due to the predominant ecological conditions, Mediterranean countries worry more about questions of water quantity and supply. This raises the question of the extent to which the WFD is at all a suitable legislative instrument to guide management processes in dry regions; the Mediterranean participants in the Joint Process, at least, experienced "major difficulties" and suggested that the ecological characteristics of the region require approaches and targets more appropriate to the Mediterranean context (European Commission, 2007b: 2). Likewise, principles such as public participation were hard to introduce in countries with weak civil society and with political systems that reflect authoritarian traditions (European Commission, 2011).

The second factor distinguishing the MED-EUWI from its Eastern counterpart is that, throughout the partnership period, the region has suffered from armed combat and civil war; this includes the Arab Spring, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and hostilities in Lebanon, Syria and other countries. Not surprisingly, the precarious security situation has affected the overall working conditions of the MED-EUWI and its overall ability to effect change on the ground (see, for instance, European Commission, 2013); more importantly, however, violent conflict resulted in considerable damage to water infrastructure in the region, diverting attention away from IWRM to reconstruction and development and leading us back to the aforementioned sanitation and supply agenda.

The third factor is that MED-EUWI partnership countries soon lost hope that legal harmonisation would bring them any closer to receiving associate status with the EU. To advance stability and welfare in the Mediterranean, the Union for the Mediterranean was established in 2008; it comprised the EU and its member states as well as 15 countries in Southeastern Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. Although formally not a component of the ENP, the Union seeks to achieve similar objectives, which is why members take the ambitions of the Union as a general indicator of the EU's interest in pursuing further integration with Mediterranean countries. In contrast to the aforementioned Eastern Partnership, however, the Union was soon associated with embodying the "end of the Euro-Mediterranean vision" (Kausch and Youngs, 2009; Bicchi, 2011). While the Union encouraged cooperation in "relatively uncontroversial areas (...) such as solar power, maritime transport, civil protection, education and small businesses" (Kausch and Youngs, 2009: 964), the organisation seemed to do less to address the more fundamental problems of civil liberties, democracy and the rule of law, which were holding countries in the region back from further integration. Kausch and Youngs suggest that, "[t]he EU has moved further and further away from seeking a 'ring of well-governed states' on its southern edge and towards seeking a 'ring of firmly governed states'" (ibid: 967). As a result, MED-EUWI countries identified a mismatch between programmes encouraging legal harmonisation and higher-level policies indicative of integration fatigue; this significantly affected the work and effectiveness of the Joint Process.

By implication, therefore, the MED-EUWI displays a mixed picture. The partnership emphasised the importance of transboundary water management and other IWRM principles; this was in no small part due to its involvement in the WFD/EUWI Joint Process and, in its attempt to work towards environmental sustainability, made it look like a twin sister of the EUWI-EECCA. The Mediterranean countries, however, showed a much greater appetite for questions of scarcity, sanitation and supply; political developments in the region and in the EU contributed to the prioritisation of a social sustainability agenda, which de-emphasised the WFD's potential role in water management in the Mediterranean.

Practical challenges greatly affected the degree to which the MED-EUWI was able to realise its potential; these included the lack of stability, not to mention the 2008 economic crisis and the post-2009 Euro crisis which prevented Greece from leading the partnership to the best of its abilities (European Commission, 2016). The MED-EUWI was quietly terminated in 2016 with no direct follow-up programme; it is an open question whether the gap can be filled by new non-EUWI initiatives such as the Water Strategy in the Western Mediterranean.

## **EUWI LATIN AMERICA**

The EUWI partnership for Latin America (EUWI-LA) is an exceptional case as it has consistently struggled to develop a distinct profile and become a major player in its own right. In reference to the analogy, used in this article, of the three faces of the EUWI – economic, social and environmental – we suggest that the EUWI-LA had no face at all.

The EUWI-LA was first announced in 2002 and began operating in 2004. Initially supported by Mexico and Portugal as co-leads, it was mainly Spain that carried the torch (European Commission, 2006b, 2007a, 2008a). This points to the first of two major problems that would seal the fate of the EUWI-LA, that is, that the Initiative suffered from a lack of commitment, both from the European institutions and from

member states other than Spain (this is testified to by numerous EUWI annual reports, see, for instance, European Commission, 2014: 25). The European Commission had already invested sizable sums in other water-related programmes in Latin America; it expected member states and the business community to take the lead in EUWI-LA, in line with the assumption that the EUWI was not a donor agency but a platform for mainstreaming existing initiatives and creating new synergies (European Commission, 2012b). EU member states, however, displayed little interest as there was not much to gain, despite the presence of shared rivers in French Guiana; EUWI partnerships elsewhere promised greater returns, as we have shown earlier. At the same time Spain's resources were limited, particularly after the 2008 financial crisis.

On the other hand, the EUWI-LA operated in an environment that was densely populated by various regional initiatives and EU-funded programmes with larger budgets than its own. This includes the Conference of Ibero-American Water Directors (CODIA), a network established in 2001 bringing together 22 Ibero-American countries. CODIA activities range from capacity building at technical, managerial and political level to stakeholder dialogues aimed at technology transfer and mutual learning (European Commission, 2008a, 2013). Training also was a key component of two EuropeAid-funded programmes, the Latin American Network of Centres of Excellence in Water (RALCEA) and WaterClima. RALCEA, operating between 2010 and 2014, relied on €2.25 million to establish a network of academic institutions across the continent to train the next generation of water managers on various governance aspects such as participation, sanitation and water quality. Waterclima (2013-2017), with a budget of €8.75 million, helped water managers develop skills to cope with climate change mitigation and adaptation; additionally, the Latin American Investment Facility provided loans and grants for infrastructure projects in the fields of climate, energy, environment and transport. The total investment sum was €5 billion, of which €200 million came from the EU (European Commission, 2014, 2015, 2016).

Although these programmes featured prominently in EUWI annual reports, none of them were direct or indirect outputs of the EUWI-LA. CODIA, in part resembling the shape and function of the WFD's Common Implementation Strategy, had already come into being prior to the establishment of the Water Initiative, and while the EUWI-LA helped run their permanent secretariat, it remained somewhat disconnected from CODIA's core activities. EUWI documents, in fact, talked about the "need to strengthen and enhance cooperation and coordination between the processes of EUWI and CODIA and seek mechanisms for strengthening collaboration and participation of EUWI in the activities promoted by the CODIA" (European Commission, 2015: 22). Without permanent working groups, and engaged in attempts that lacked the "adaptability (...) to the specific socio-economic conditions" in the region (ibid), the EUWI-LA failed to make a lasting impression on Latin America's water sector; at the same time, it would be misleading to see CODIA as the very embodiment of the EUWI in Latin America, not the least because the relative lack of European participation was incompatible with the EUWI's partnership approach.

Obviously, only if the EUWI commands the means to do so will it be able to successfully synchronise activities, facilitate events and disseminate knowledge. In Latin America, however, CODIA has enjoyed much greater authority and legitimacy than the EUWI-LA ever did; in fact, the funding governed by the various EuropeAid programmes led to a paradoxical situation where the EUWI-LA, as the implied centre of water-related EU activities in Latin America, was much weaker than the dynamic projects that it was supposed to coordinate. Left in a limbo as to what its aims, functions and achievements really were, it is not surprising that the EUWI-LA was one of those partnerships that was phased out in 2016 without a direct follow-up initiative.

So to what extent did the EUWI-LA contribute to the promotion of WFD principles in Latin America? The answer is: not much. True, quite a few initiatives in the region focused on questions of environmental sustainability, including transboundary water management, water pricing and water reuse; others brought in ideas compatible with economic and social sustainability in the field of water. In line with the more general development-oriented goals that these programmes pursued, however, a good number of



activities, particularly capacity building and training events, provided technical skills with no particular focus on IWRM or the WFD; more importantly, few, if any, were actually true EUWI-LA activities.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our opening argument was based on the hypothesis that the origins of the EUWI in global debates over sustainable development would lead to divergent interpretations of the WFD, each emphasising different 'faces' or manifestations of its core principles: economic, environmental and social. We also speculated that while different ecological, political and social settings could partly account for variations in EUWI implementation and the role that the WFD plays therein, a combination of EU, member state and partner country government imperatives were equally important. There is certainly evidence from our analyses of the five EUWI partnerships to support this argument.

We demonstrate a pattern of initial centralisation within the EUWI as a whole, which eventually leads to divergence from the EU's original conceptualisation. While the differing contextual conditions in the five partnerships are no doubt important factors in shaping the policy priorities of EUWI partnerships, the strategic imperatives of partnership constituents are perhaps more significant.

This divergence in strategic focus includes joint EU-national government priorities for poverty reduction and welfare (Africa), water policy reform (EECCA, MED-EUWI), water scarcity, sanitation and supply (MED-EUWI), and cooperation around business and research (CEWP). This observation leads us to suggest that EUWI partnerships developed distinct thematic profiles over time and that it is these distinctions – in addition to the diverging institutional trajectories briefly discussed below – that undermine the perception of the EUWI as a coherent political initiative. Specifically, the CEWP first and foremost has prioritised economic policy and trade objectives in the water sector; this can also include research collaborations and knowledge exchange but these are often in contexts where such cooperation might serve to enhance the achievement of trade and growth imperatives. The Africa Working Group (the EUWI's sub-Saharan partnership), in contrast, devised work programmes that mainly tackled water-related questions of social policy and welfare; these were aimed at opening the door for business opportunities, in particular for entrepreneurs based in Europe. The primary ambition, however, was not to maximise economic growth and trade but to deal with pressing social problems related to water access, education and public health. These themes also fared prominently in the MED-EUWI; however, the Mediterranean partnership also aimed to address ecological challenges in the field of water, a thematic focus that lies at the heart of the Eastern Partnership, EUWI-EECCA, and its successor, the EUWI+. The Latin America partnership faced strong regional competition and, in the end, never developed a distinct profile.

These observations have important implications for the global diffusion of WFD water policy principles. Essentially, only the partnerships in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, and in the Mediterranean were characterised by interest constellations that enabled the transfer of knowledge, skills, values and principles and their gradual legal codification in partnership countries. A central role is played here by the incentive of further political and economic integration associated with the adoption of the EU's *acquis communautaire*, a key component of the European Neighbourhood Policy. This condition was absent in the cases of the Africa, China and Latin America partnerships. In the absence of conditionality and any other functional pressures that would encourage partnership countries to adopt key tenets of the WFD in domestic water policy and management, social and economic considerations in Africa and China, respectively, overshadowed questions of environmental sustainability. This leads us to conclude that, upon sober reflection, the EUWI may report many achievements but has been rather ineffective when it comes to promoting the WFD outside of Europe.

These region-specific imperatives have also set the various partnerships on a divergent institutional trajectory. Some were wound down – for instance the EUWI partnership in Latin America – and others, such as Africa and the Mediterranean, were transformed into looser collaborative platforms, that is, they

underwent institutional fragmentation or reconstitution. We can digress here into an analogy drawn from our personal interests. The EUWI could be perceived as a rock band, originally formed to tap into the latest musical wave or zeitgeist. Several individualists, typically with different preferences, meet to make music together under a common managerial direction. They develop over time, as with other bands, but unfortunately move in different directions rather than sticking to the original vision until, after a while, the unified artistic approach has largely disappeared. Either some group members endure, taking the band in a different musical direction, or the band splits up, with members pursuing solo projects or new collaborations. In this way, the various partnership components of the EUWI have grown apart from its original founding objectives and, at this point, a reunion tour is unlikely; in the meantime, the zeitgeist has moved on, reflecting a changed discourse surrounding the EU's international role in water governance. One lesson for the EU to learn is that a more flexible, adaptive learning approach may be advisable, i.e. the EU and member states should be more self-reflexive when it comes to their own interests and expectations and should build these insights into the development of, and approach to, any similar initiatives in future (Martin-Mazé, 2015).

This changing 'musical direction' provides several avenues for novel research on the EU's promotion of water policy globally.

First, our analysis necessarily excluded new band members, in this case the India-EU Water Partnership; the IEWP exhibits characteristics of the EUWI but is essentially a novel collaborative network in its aims, objectives and configuration. Productive research could be undertaken from a governance perspective to understand how such a hybrid approach – call it EUWI 2.0 – compares to other partnerships and the extent to which it supports EU and national government imperatives, particularly those of India which faces chronic water sustainability issues (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2013).

The second possible avenue for novel research is the broader extension of such analyses to encompass debates on the EU's external governance. The notion of the EU as a 'civil power' (Bull, 1982) has been subsequently reinterpreted through Manner's (2002, 2006) concept of 'normative power' (see also Forsberg, 2011; Birchfield, 2013) and the idea of the EU as a 'market power' (Damro, 2012). Obvious questions for investigation include 1) why the EU chooses to operationalise different forms of power within the respective partnership platforms, with further targeted analyses of the underlying strategic rationales of EUWI network development; 2) how effective the EU is in its external water governance; and 3) whether the EU is learning from its experiences. There can also be further development of links to Europeanisation, EU external governance, and neighbourhood policy literature (Schimmelfennig et al., 2003; Lavenex, 2008; Adelle et al., 2018).

Finally, an important empirical question is the extent to which such operationalisation of power via the EUWI is driving the broader IWRM agenda, given the prioritisation given to these water management principles in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

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