7th March 2022

Short Notes of 1st Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Roundtable

Organizers: WWF and the James Hutton Institute

MERLIN (Mainstreaming Ecological Restoration of freshwater-related ecosystems in a Landscape context: INnovation, upscaling and transformation) is a European Horizon 2020 research project (2021-2025) with 44 partner organisations across Europe. MERLIN will deliver sector specific and overall cross-sectoral strategies to support transformative restoration. To make these strategies meaningful and practical, we need to work closely with sectors that affect, and are affected by, restoration of freshwater environments using Nature-based solutions (NbS).

Water is essential to human life, health and economic development, and the climate and biodiversity crises are placing new pressures on the Water Supply and Sanitation Sector (WSS). In this first roundtable we explored the risks these threats imply for the sector; what place restoration and Nature-based Solutions have for the sector and opportunities or challenges for implementing NbS approach.

This roundtable was a virtual gathering of a small group of forward-thinking sector leaders to discuss these issues, improve our current analysis, and consider if and how the best practice examples already being trialed across Europe can be mainstreamed. Second and third roundtable will take place in the middle of the project (autumn 2023) and towards the end (spring 2025), respectively.

Participants

Besides the MERLIN team (JHI and WWF), following organisations participated: Aquafed and Aqualia, representing the views of private operators, and Aqua Publica Europea, the European association of public water operators. A meeting with a representative from the European Water Managers Association (EUWMA) was held separately.

What is the Water Sector?

It was brought to our attention that the sector should not be addressed as Water Supply Sector, but Water Supply and Sanitation Sector. This will be addressed in further correspondence and briefing for the sector, as MERLIN's focus is on availability of drinking water, i.e. upstream restoration to preserve water supply while sanitation, water reuse, or wastewater treatment is also important for the sector. Wastewater treatment is the easiest way for water operators to include NbS. Water purification in MERLIN is implicit in restoration cases through natural processes within wetlands, but the MERLIN cases are not directly related to treating wastewater as such.

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Beyond Drinking Water Supply – many economic sectors depend on water

BusinessEurope (the Confederation of European Business, BusinessEurope, is a lobby group representing enterprises of all sizes in the European Union and seven non-EU European countries) was mentioned in the discussion, and we were asked to explore their stance on NbS as they have many members who rely on water supplies for industrial production processes. BusinessEurope could be a relevant stakeholder for cross-sectoral workshops.

There is a need for dialogue between all the stakeholders using water to address issues of fair allocation and to discuss the use of different allocation models.

Distinguishing private and public sector stance on NbS

A comment was made that there is a difference between how the public and the private sector look at NbS. MERLIN should aim to tackle all sides of the story. Public operators believe that the management of water, as an essential resource, belongs in the public domain and that all the revenues generated from water management services should be reinvested in the water cycle, while private operators advocate for the benefits of public-private partnerships. Both stances support sustainable use of water resources. Equally, private operators advocate for strong and efficient public leadership to maximize the benefits of public-private partnerships, with public authorities having the freedom to use private operators to efficiently execute tasks where and when appropriate.

Involvement of regulators and water managers in round tables

Standards vary regionally – a need was expressed to have a dialogue with those managing the natural resources (water managers) and those setting standards that operators respond to when considering NbS. Water managers could be invited in the roundtables or their opinions and views collected using our individual case study boards within the 17 cases used in MERLIN. We understand the need to involve WAREG - European Water Regulators - to understand regional variation in standard setting and will be meeting with policy and regulatory actors separately.

Potential of NbS for WSS

Participants saw the potential of NbS but would like to have more specific cases as examples to illustrate how NbS can preserve resources, reduce investment (NbS are often cheaper than traditional engineering) and also reduce energy and carbon footprints. There is also the need to adopt common methodologies and metrics, so that investment decisions (for time-horizons of 10 - 50 years) can be made with more certainty.

The most common application of NbS in the WSS sector was to handle water overflows during intense rainfall events, when the current infrastructure cannot cope and currently effluent can enter water courses. However, MERLIN is mainly working upstream of urban centres and protecting water supplies before they enter urban infrastructure.

Participants were interested in NbS upstream to protect resources, particularly with increased potential for drought under climate change, but this is often large-scale ecosystem intervention that is difficult for water companies to deliver on their own. Instead, they rely on working in partnership with water managers and this approach can increase the governance challenges. However, there are promising developments, such as the recent 'Gestion des milieux aquatiques et prévention des inondations (GEMAPI)[1] law in France, whereby water utilities can be granted the responsibility to manage also water resources upstream, with restoration-protection objectives. The law also allows municipalities and water operators to finance these interventions through dedicated taxes. This is a promising development, that should help address governance fragmentation, and favour uptake of NbS. It's also a development which

[1] Management of aquatic environments and flood prevention. Link here: -gemapi

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is in line with the new Drinking Water Directive, which promotes a stronger connection between water management in the urban cycle and upstream management of water resources.

It was mentioned that 1000s of years of water engineering are rather hard to undo and we need to support this change. NbS are not yet in the toolbox of operators. We need to provide more information and raise awareness of NbS to complement events such as the Aqua Publica Europea event held in November '21.

Next steps

Once participants have commented and approved the draft report, the report will be finalised and posted on the MERLIN Website. The insights will be used to inform the rest of the project, particularly those working on cases linked to water supply. A formal briefing for the WSS sector will be developed over the summer, building on the roundtable and other research. In the meantime, we will be interacting with policy makers, regulators and water managers to understand their role in mainstreaming NbS in the sector.

Please contact Sanja Pokrajac [spokrajac@wwfcee.org] and Anna.Berczi-Siket [Anna.Berczi-Siket@wwf.hu] or Kirsty Blackstock [Kirsty.Blackstock@hutton.ac.uk] for further information.

The James Hutton Institute

WWF

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