

Water, time and European cities - History matters for the futures

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INTRODUCTION “Water is the only drink for a wise man” Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) Water and sewerage services are part of the visible infrastructure of our cities and communities and are often taken for granted. Paradoxically their real importance for people and communities is remembered only when something goes wrong with these systems. However, in many cases it has taken a long time – several decades if not centuries — to develop them into modern systems. And it is also still true in the early 21st century that some European cities lack appropriate water and/or sanitation services. This book is based largely on the study “City in Time” that was to address the historical differences and similarities in cities’ decision-making over the long run and how these affect the decision-making of each case city. City in Time aimed to use futures research to illustrate the interconnectedness of past, present and future decision-making. It sought to study the development of water systems in a wide institutional context covering the political, economic, social, technical and environmental dimensions and to identify long term patterns in decision-making, as well as the underlying driving and constraining factors. City in Time was to study urban water system reform in 29 cities, in 13 countries – originally in eight EU member and five candidate countries, four of which became full members on the 1st of May, 2004.

The major objective of City in Time was to discover the key strategic decisions that have affected the overall evolution of water and sewerage services in the city. Some of these strategic decisions may at first have seemed less important while later having proved to be of great importance. The study sought specifically to address the following research questions:

- What were the strategic decisions that have mostly affected the development (binding, limiting, postponing)?
- Who and what factors define and create demand for services?
- How does the historical context constrain potential best practices for the future?
- What limits do technical choices of the past impose on decision-making?
- On what basis have selected strategies been formulated and decided upon in different time periods?
- How has the role of public-private partnership (PPP) changed over the years, and how is it likely to change in the future?

The major sources of data used by City in Time to analyse past and future decision-making included:

- Dates and sequence of key decisions on systems, e.g. special public bodies, responsibilities of local government or central government, changes in ownership of systems between private sector, national and local governments; changes in operators between sectors; changes in pricing and charging methods; introduction of water rights;
- Local and national (and international) past decisions, which constrain and limit present choices, e.g. bulk water supply sources; boundaries of administrative units; taxation and borrowing powers of local governments;
- Factors and interest groups involved in the past, e.g. emergence of public health issues; origins of private sector role; environmental issues and local traditions; economic development; restructurings at entry to and exit from former communist regimes in eastern European countries.

Keywords:

Strategic choices, Sustainability, Path dependence, Water Supply and sanitation, Urban environment, City-service development, Water pollution control, Public policy, Institutional development, History and futures research, Europe

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