

Paris celebrates a decade of public water success

By Célia Blauel

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

A bold political statement

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

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

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

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

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

A sound, practical decision

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

A decade after remunicipalisation, Eau de Paris's top-of-its-class industrial and economic performance blatantly contradicts the naysayers who predicted failure when the city decided not to renew its contracts

with Veolia and Suez in 2008, and instead created a new public operator. A few figures illustrate the public operator's capacity to run the water service efficiently in this major metropolis: the network yield is above 90 per cent (10 points over the national average for unaccounted-for water), and water quality is excellent, with a 100 per cent rate of compliance for two consecutive years in 2017 and 2018. This unprecedented performance was made possible by the expertise of the Eau de Paris team and the constant supervision and adaption of processes and treatments to meet evolving public health standards.

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

Solidarity and responsibility

Universal, affordable access to drinking water for all is part of our DNA at Eau de Paris. As such, one of the board's first decisions when Eau de Paris was founded was to lower water prices by 8 per cent. It was presented as a way to give back to the people part of the profits that private operators were making on the water service but also as a sign that public management really means affordability for everyone. Since then, there has been strict oversight of water rates. In 2020, rates remain lower

than before remunicipalisation and are still the lowest in the greater Paris area at €1.07 per cubic meter.

The public company also contributes €500,000 annually to the Fonds de solidarité pour le logement de Paris, a fund that helps households struggling to meet their housing expenses, including recurring costs such as energy and water.

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

For the last 10 years, Eau de Paris has maintained and even stepped up its actions to promote access to water in public spaces. The company manages more than 1,200 drinking fountains today. This probably makes Paris the world's best-equipped city in terms of free access to water in public spaces and helps to reduce plastic water bottle consumption. In 2016, the public company also helped implement the city's participatory

budget¹ by installing 41 new fountains, including 11 that distribute sparkling water. During winter, about 80 drinking fountains remain in operation.



The drinking water fountain in front of the Eau de Paris office. Photo by Satoko Kishimoto

Adaptation to climate change, catchment protection, biodiversity and green transition

Being responsible means thinking globally. As such, Eau de Paris is committed to reducing the social and ecological footprint of its water production and distribution activities. Water is a common resource of vital importance and, as a public company committed to source-to-tap water management and to fulfilling economic as much as social mandates, Eau de Paris gathers and fosters in-house expertise and innovation. This allows us to adapt continuously to the new needs and challenges of the smart sustainable city as well as to the effects of climate change. Climate

disruption forces us to anticipate its potential impacts on water resources in terms of quantity and quality but also on water demand and needs in dense urban areas. These impacts include possible hydric stress increase (when water levels drop in rivers and water basins), frequent periods of drought, average temperature hikes, as well as urban heat islands in dense urban areas where stone buildings tend to absorb and accumulate heat. By acting beyond its core industrial business to help make Paris and the greater Parisian area resilient and sustainable, Eau de Paris is committed to contributing to public urban and environmental policies.

Notably, Eau de Paris is a pioneer in water catchment protection policies. Protecting underground and river water resources improves the quality of water resources and preserves the landscape and our common natural heritage. Farming has an impact on the aquatic environment when it comes to quality and quantity, as well as biodiversity. As part of its resource protection policy, Eau de Paris partners with local stakeholders and the Basin Agency (a public entity that manages water with all the stakeholders at the watershed level), to foster more responsible water management by helping redirect farming methods towards a more sustainable and environmentally friendly model. For example, Eau de Paris buys farmland and makes it available to farmers through cheap rural environmental leases. In exchange, the farmers agree to use organic and sustainable farming methods. This medium and long-term approach allows Eau de Paris to improve source water quality, which will reduce the cost and environmental impact of its treatment.

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

Not least, as a major player in the energy transition in the Île-de-France region, Eau de Paris has set high goals for itself with a plan that calls for reductions in the climate and energy impact of its activities. By the end of the year 2020, the company aims to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 15 per cent and its energy consumption by 12 per cent and increase its use of renewable energy to 95 per cent of overall energy consumed. The company is also helping reduce CO₂ emissions by producing renewable energy using 11,000 m² of photovoltaic panels that generated 17,500 MWh of power in 2018, as well as geothermal generation that produced 15,100 MWh.²

An exceptional heritage

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

Eau de Paris promotes non-potable water use when appropriate to limit the impact on water resources. This is ecologically wise: non-potable water needs not undergo purification treatment so it does not require chemicals at production, which also requires less energy and is cheaper.

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

Conclusion

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

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Célia Blauel is President of Eau de Paris and Deputy Mayor of Paris in charge of the environment, sustainable development, water and the energy-climate plan.

Endnotes

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