



**Thematic Week:** Water and City

**Thematic Axes:** City Networks

**Title of presentation:** The experience of ICLEI in promoting sustainable water management through a local government network

**Author:** Barbara Anton

International Training Centre, ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, Leopoldring 3, D-79098 Freiburg, Germany. E-mail: [barbara.anton@iclei.org](mailto:barbara.anton@iclei.org), telephone: +49-761/368 92 20, fax: +49-761/368 92 29.

**Abstract:**

ICLEI is an international local government network promoting urban policies and practices that are suitable to positively contribute to global sustainability conditions. The management approaches developed by ICLEI aim at building sustainable communities while protecting global common goods such as fresh water.

The core of ICLEI's Water Programme is the Water Campaign approach. This is a performance-based framework in which local governments work along a process of five milestones. The generic milestones - to be adapted for application in different regional settings - are: (1) an inventory of the current local water (resources/management/access/...) situation, (2) the setting of targets, (3) the development of a local water action plan, (4) the implementation of policies and measures, and (5) the monitoring, evaluation and reporting of achievements.

The ICLEI Water Campaign was launched in the year 2000 and has so far become especially successful in Australia. Starting with originally 5 pilot local governments, there are now close to 120 city councils participating in a voluntary capacity-building programme all across the continent. ICLEI Oceania, located in Melbourne, aggregates the outcomes of the activities into national reports. These provide a snapshot of water situations, trends and priorities at local level in Australia and an overview of the targets to which the participating councils have committed themselves. The more than 40 local water action plans that have been formulated up to now reveal a broad range of practical approaches striving to keep a balance between sustaining precious eco-systems and meeting the water needs of the local communities.

**Key words:** water resources, local water management, sustainability, network, performance orientation

## The experience of ICLEI in promoting sustainable water management through a local government network

By Barbara Anton, International Training Centre, ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability  
barbara.anton@iclei.org

12 September 2008

### 1. ICLEI – a local government network fostering global sustainability

To understand the role of water management in ICLEI's activities it is necessary to first get a broader picture about the background of the organisation.

ICLEI was conceived in 1989 when 35 local government leaders from Canada and the USA met with a leading atmospheric scientist about the depletion of the ozone layer. They pledged to establish local laws to phase out chemicals that deplete the Earth's ozone layer. This triggered the idea to create an agency that could coordinate local government responses to global environmental problems. The idea met high interest among local governments, and eventually an agreement was endorsed with the UN Environment Programme to host the founding congress for such an organisation.

More than 200 local governments from 43 countries participated in this congress that took place at the UN headquarters in New York in September 1990. One of its results was the adoption of a Charter. Then called the 'International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives', ICLEI began its operations in March 1991. In 2003, the name was changed to 'ICLEI—Local Governments for Sustainability' to better reflect a broader mandate to address sustainability issues.

ICLEI can best be described by looking at its three main dimensions as an *association*, a *movement* and an *agency*.

As an *association*, ICLEI currently counts more than 950 cities, towns, regions and their organisations as its members. Although varying tremendously in size, population, geographical situations, resources and so forth and being confronted with a large array of different challenges, all ICLEI members are dedicated to finding local solutions to working towards sustainable development.

In regular intervals, the ICLEI members come together at country, regional and international level to discuss innovative approaches and good policies and practices, but also to decide about ICLEI's main strategies. The last European Membership Convention, for example, was hosted by the City of Zaragoza from 23 to 25 June 2008.

Being also an *agency*, ICLEI provides a large variety of framework programmes and services to local governments to support them in working towards their sustainability objectives. To these belong, among others, performance-oriented campaigns, thematic networks, target-group specific events, a wide range of tools and research and piloting activities.

Finally, ICLEI can also be seen as a *movement* in which local governments strive both locally and internationally for creating sustainable cities – characterised through a viable local economy, just and peaceful communities, eco-efficiency and a sound resilience vis-à-vis external impacts - while at the same time protecting global common goods, such as climate and air, soil, biodiversity and - last, but not least - water. This is also expressed in

ICLEI's mission which summarises the organisations' ambitions by stating that it aims "to build and serve a worldwide movement of local governments to achieve tangible improvements in global sustainability with special focus on environmental conditions through cumulative local actions."

## 2. Sustainable water management at local level

When talking about water management and cities, water supply services and waste water management often first come to mind. However, it is important to fully understand the water cycle in its different dimensions and also in its interactions with other elements of the natural ecosystem and with human activities.

A local government needs to be fully aware of the vast multitude of linkages between their own operations and the natural environment. These linkages work in both directions: on the one hand, the conditions of the natural environment impact on the ability of a local government to provide its services, on the other hand, the way in which a local government operates will have repercussions on the natural conditions.

For these reasons, ICLEI tries to get across a more holistic thinking about water management. In order to meet human needs, it is indispensable to care at the same time for the natural capital as a whole and the eco-systems on which the goods and services to the community depend.



Figure 1: Local Government in the Water Cycle. Taken from: *Reaping the Benefits – How Local Governments Gain from IWRM*, ICLEI Africa Secretariat (2008)

This has also implications for the internal arrangements for water management within a local administration. In order to take the variety of interdependencies into account, it is necessary that *all* local government departments assess their operations for the effects that

they may have on water resources and eventually also on the performance of local water supply services.

The diagram below includes those mandates that are indirectly related to water and need to be engaged to achieve a more integrated and thus sustainable approach to water management:

Poor disposal of solid waste, for example, and the leaching of harmful substances from landfill and hazardous waste sites into groundwater can contaminate water resources and substantially increase the need for the treatment of water before it is entering water supply networks. Or certain choices in land-use, such as the construction of new developments in former wetland areas, can alter the local hydrology, severely damage eco-systems and biodiversity and in the long run require costly investments into securing local water supplies.

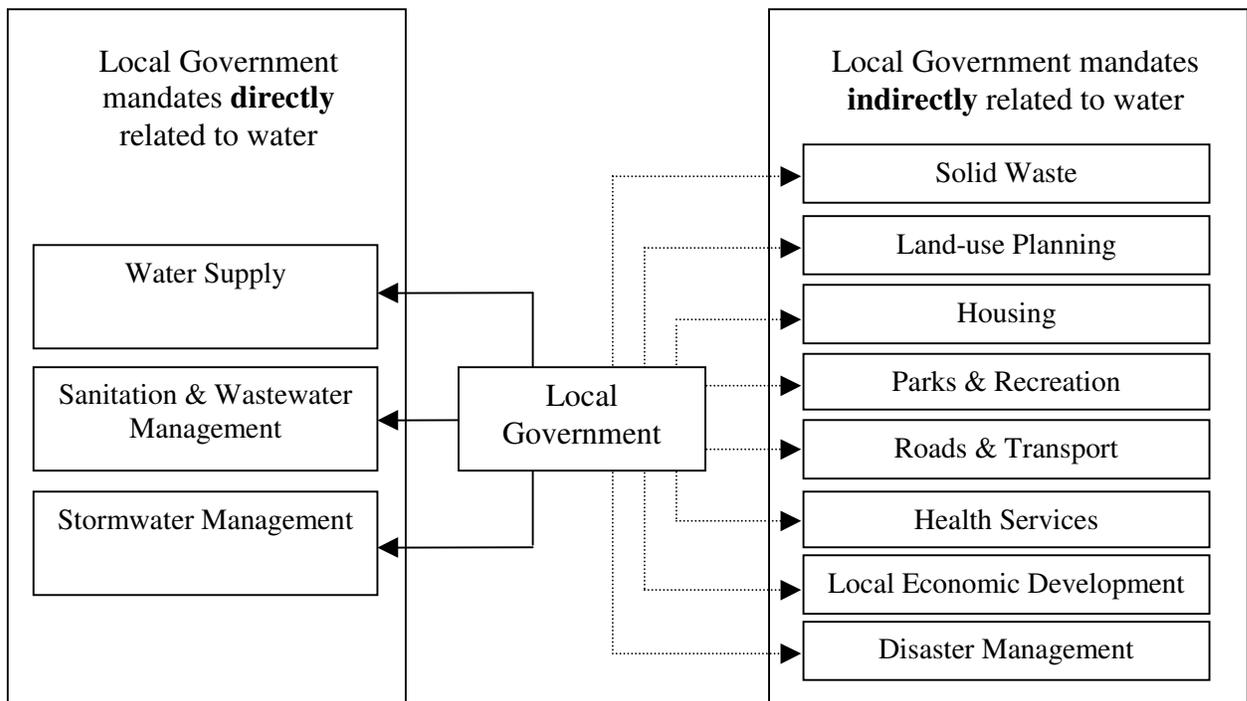


Figure 2: Local government mandates that are directly and indirectly related to water resources. Taken from: *Engaging in IWRM – Practical Steps and Tools for Local Government*, ICLEI Africa Secretariat (2008)

These are only a few spotlights on what local governments can do to protect their local water resources and to contribute to securing their water supplies. Prerequisite is a holistic understanding of the water cycle and how it interacts with their own operations. ICLEI therefore encourages local governments to work together in watershed areas and also seek to get involved in higher-level basin organisations to harvest the full potential of an integrated approach.

### **3. The ICLEI Water Campaign**

With the Water Campaign ICLEI has created a performance-based programme to translate a holistic understanding of water management into a comprehensive framework of action. Launched in June 2000, the Campaign aims at mobilising local governments to achieve – together with their stakeholders – “tangible improvements in the sustainable use of water resources by protecting and enhancing local watersheds, reducing water pollution, improving the availability and efficiency of water and environmental sanitation services and promoting public health”. (*The Water Campaign*, ICLEI Canada, 2000). The five generic milestones along which a local government works to achieve these improvements are, in short:

1. Compiling an inventory
2. Setting targets
3. Developing a Local Water Action Plan
4. Implementing the actions
5. Monitoring and reporting

Of course a cyclical approach will have to be applied since the results of the implemented actions will have to be assessed in terms of their effectiveness to achieve the target set.

The ICLEI Water Campaign suggests three potential areas of a Water Agenda:

- the Municipal Water Agenda, developed for and within the local administration as a water user itself;
- the Community Water Agenda that is based on a participatory planning process and covers the entire municipal area; and
- the Watershed Agenda aiming at the establishment of a regional-multistakeholder platform to develop a strategy for an entire catchment.

Since its inception, ICLEI’s Water Campaign has led to a number of different activities in different parts of the world; in each case, activities have been adapted and modified to match local and regional circumstances. Especially successful has been the development of the Campaign in Australia and the majority of ICLEI’s experiences in working in the area of local water management have derived from this continent. This is why in the following Australia will be in focus.

The Water Campaign™ in Australia is a capacity-building programme for freshwater management to which local governments can commit themselves on a voluntary basis. It is mainly addressing the reduction of water consumption and the improvement of water quality. Initiated in 2001, the Water Campaign™ in Australia is nowadays the largest local government water programme world-wide with around 120 councils taking part.

The Campaign was first started as a pilot with five local councils, namely the City of Melbourne, the City of Mitcham, the City of Port Philip, Sutherland Shire Council and Wollongong City Council. These went through the milestones as laid out further above and also presented in the following diagram in some more detail:

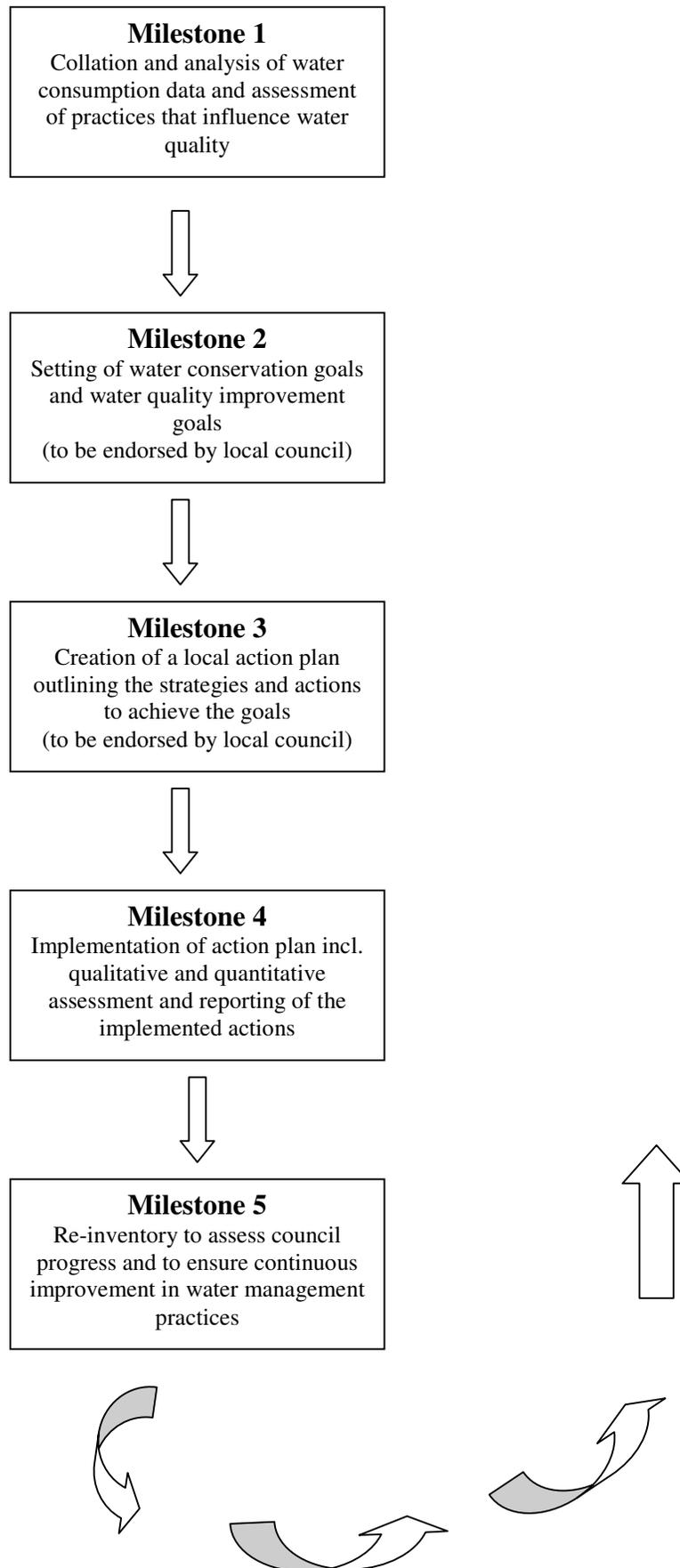
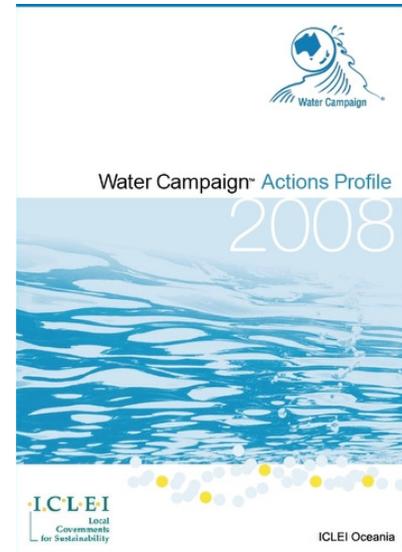


Figure 3: The five milestones of the ICLEI Water Campaign

The results of milestones 1 (inventory reports), milestone 2 (goals) and milestone 3 (action plans) have been compiled and published on the Campaign's website (<http://www.iclei.org/index.php?id=2389>). While only a few councils participating in the Water Campaign™ in Australia have yet reached Milestone 4, many of them have already implemented a number of excellent water management initiatives.

The 'Water Campaign™ Actions Profile' highlights successful actions from 13 councils in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia. The sample chosen reflects a broad diversity of different sizes of councils, different conditions and different approaches to sustainable water management. The cases cover, among others, the re-use of stormwater, rainwater harvesting, more efficient irrigation practices and options for a Water Sensitive Urban Design.



So - what has made the Water Campaign approach so attractive to local councils that involvement is still growing and commitment still so high after so many years? A few assumptions on the success factors are the following:

- The Campaign represents a long-term strategic approach with a focus on implementation and on tangible achievements. This is important for the councils that are accountable to their electorates and their external funders.
- The Campaign offers a clear process of performance-based milestones.
- Participants are supported by ICLEI's Oceania Secretariat to achieve these milestones. Capacity-building as well as a wide range of tools and methodologies are made available from which the local councils can choose what fits their issues and conditions best.
- The Campaign is closely adjusted to federal, state, regional and local priorities and thus backed and also financially supported by government at different levels.
- The Councils find themselves well integrated into a network of peers. This provides inspiration, motivation and a sense of feasibility as well as access to a rich source of knowledge and experiences.
- The Campaign also offers a framework for collaboration with other stakeholders, such as the private sector or community-based organisations.
- The importance of the political endorsement of the goals and plans by the local council cannot be overestimated. Only steadfast political backing can ensure that the necessary financing is in place, larger innovations can be pulled through, and difficulties along the way can be overcome in a common effort of all stakeholders concerned.

- Last, but not least, the Campaign provides a mechanism for benchmarking and an opportunity for the participating councils to raise their profile vis-à-vis other cities, but also vis-à-vis regional and national government.

#### 4. Conclusions

As members of an international network such as ICLEI, local governments can greatly benefit from lessons learnt in sustainable water management world-wide. This happens through a wide range of different ways and means such as the implementation-oriented Campaign approach as described above; ample opportunities for peer exchanges such as at national, regional and international events for local government specialists; access to best practices through case studies shared via internet platforms and publications; joint research activities etc.

When it comes to water, it is first and foremost key to promote a water-sensitive culture all across the community. The public needs to recognise water as the central source of all life and appreciate the services provided through aquatic eco-systems. Vice versa, people have to be aware about the vulnerability of the water cycle and the sometimes dramatic impacts of inconsiderate human interventions.

Local governments have ample opportunities to create such a broad awareness, and they can also learn from each other how to best achieve it. Learning from peers often benefits from a better mutual understanding and trust. A network of peers can thus greatly enhance an effective exchange of expertise and opinions on critical issues and possible solutions.

Being part of a network also enhances opportunities for getting insights into the perspectives of other actors or stakeholders working around the same issue.. An individual local government, for example, trying to find a way of communicating with the national water department in their country can find itself in a time-consuming exercise with little effect. A network, however, has a lot to offer in terms of facilitating such kind of communication. Representing a larger number of local governments, it has a stronger weight vis-à-vis other spheres of local government and is thus recognised more easily as an equal partner which is especially important in situations where power is an important asset for taking the right decisions.

Looking a little bit more closely at the local governments working together in ICLEI's Water Campaign and learning from the experiences in Australia, but also in other regions such as Africa and Asia, three main points need particular attention:

- *Linking priorities*: impacts of local actions can be increased when synergies are mobilised through linking priorities at local with those at provincial, national or regional level. This can also foster buy-in and the willingness to provide concrete support. A network can help coordinate the links between priorities at different levels and thus harmonise policies and strategies.
- *Visibility of progress*: readiness for action can be stimulated by offering a clear framework for action including a monitoring, reporting and benchmarking mechanism. Being in charge of providing services to their citizens and thus their local electorate, local governments have to be able to provide clear evidence of improvements. A network of like-minded colleagues working in the same direction helps to position oneself within a possible range of achievements.
- *Up-scaling*: finally, it is important that the potential of innovative approaches does not become restricted to being applied by only one or a few local governments. A network

provides a perfect platform for allowing other colleagues to benefit from innovation by testing it in their own local settings.

To summarise with a few final words, it will be advisable for water managers and decision-makers at all levels to learn from the ecological sophistication of the water cycle. As nature suggests a harmonised interplay of lots of different components to reveal its best capacities, human beings will have to be intelligent ‘networkers’ to enjoy the live-giving benefits of water now, but also in the long term.

### References:

Morrison, K., Brugmann, J.: *The Water Campaign*, ICLEI Canada, 2000

Anton, B., Bonjean, M., Bromley, J., Cox, D., Dickens, C., Govender, V., Philip, R., Smits, S., Sullivan, C.A., Van Nierkerk, K., Chonguica, E., Monggae, F., Nyagwambo, L., Pule, R., and Berraondo López, M.: *Local Government and Integrated Water Resources Management, Part I (Reaping the Benefits – How Local Governments Gain from IWRM) and Part III (Engaging in IWRM – Practical Steps and Tools for Local Governments)*, ICLEI Africa Secretariat, 2008

*Water Campaign<sup>TM</sup> Actions Profile 2008*, ICLEI Oceania, 2008

### Websites:

[www.iclei.org/water](http://www.iclei.org/water)

[http://www.iclei.org/index.php?id=water\\_home](http://www.iclei.org/index.php?id=water_home)

[www.iclei-europe.org/index.php?id=1587](http://www.iclei-europe.org/index.php?id=1587)