TD-Lab – Laboratory for
Transdisciplinary Research
of the Berlin University Alliance
WORKSHOP REPORT

Dialogues ON WATER
Network for research and practice

A community program of TD-Lab – Laboratory for Transdisciplinary Research of the Berlin University Alliance

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on water
WasserWissen in Berlin
BERLIN UNIVERSITY ALLIANCE
FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN
HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN
TECHNISCHE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN
CHARITÉ

The Berlin University Alliance

The Berlin University Alliance (BUA) is a network of excellence comprising Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Technische Universität Berlin, and Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, and is funded by the German federal and state governments as part of the Excellence Strategy.

Guided by the motto “Fostering Knowledge Exchange”, the Berlin University Alliance has set itself the goal of promoting knowledge exchange with the public. The TD-Lab supports this by strengthening the transdisciplinary research approach – the collaboration between the world of academia and society. Stakeholders from the academic disciplines and various different walks of life, such as politics, business and civil society, work together on topics in the focus of cutting-edge research in Berlin.

Content


?
How can researchers and practitioners from the same field be linked with each other?

Introduction

A large number of scientists in Berlin and Brandenburg are researching water topics. At the same time, water in all its facets is rather a practical field where many stakeholders work with great dedication in administration, in water management and water-related institutions, or volunteer in NGOs. Overlaps between research and practice, however, often remain unnoticed or go unused. And yet they are at the heart of transdisciplinary research – and thus of solutions to the great challenges of our time. With the Dialogues ON WATER we are helping to make more systematic use of these synergies.

We asked ourselves: *How can researchers and practitioners in a given subject area be better linked up? How can we create momentum for new joint research activities – or long-lasting networks that transfer research findings into applications that benefit society?*

We are subject specialists at the TD-Lab – Laboratory for Transdisciplinary Research of the Berlin University Alliance. With the Dialogues ON WATER we have developed a model program that brings together stakeholders from research and academia, politics and administration, business and civil society organizations – developed with appropriate methodology in mind and designed for transferability.
Between October 2024 and March 2026, we carried out the Dialogues ON WATER Community Program which brought together participants in various event formats. The aim was not so much selective networking as the creation and fostering of a *Community of Practice* for transdisciplinary water research in the integrated research landscape of Berlin.

In this Community Program we combined three interlinked elements:

- ***network building*** as the basis for sustainable cooperation,
- ***co-exploration*** of current and urgent research questions,
- ***co-dissemination*** of outcomes towards practice.

For us, the most important insight from the Dialogues was that there is still a great need for exchange. This workshop report is not only intended as a summary of the events, but also as inspiration to all those who work in transdisciplinary research or who design similar dialogue formats in the field of water. It is aimed at those who explore interfaces, develop exchange formats, seek to build strategic networks and systematically establish knowledge transfer.

In the following, we describe the conceptual structure of the program, the objectives we pursued and the methodological choices we made. We intend the Dialogues ON WATER to be a transferable model for structured community education in transdisciplinary fields with concrete insights, learnings and open-ended questions.

Photo: Jan-Christoph Hartung.

Photo: Alexander Rentsch

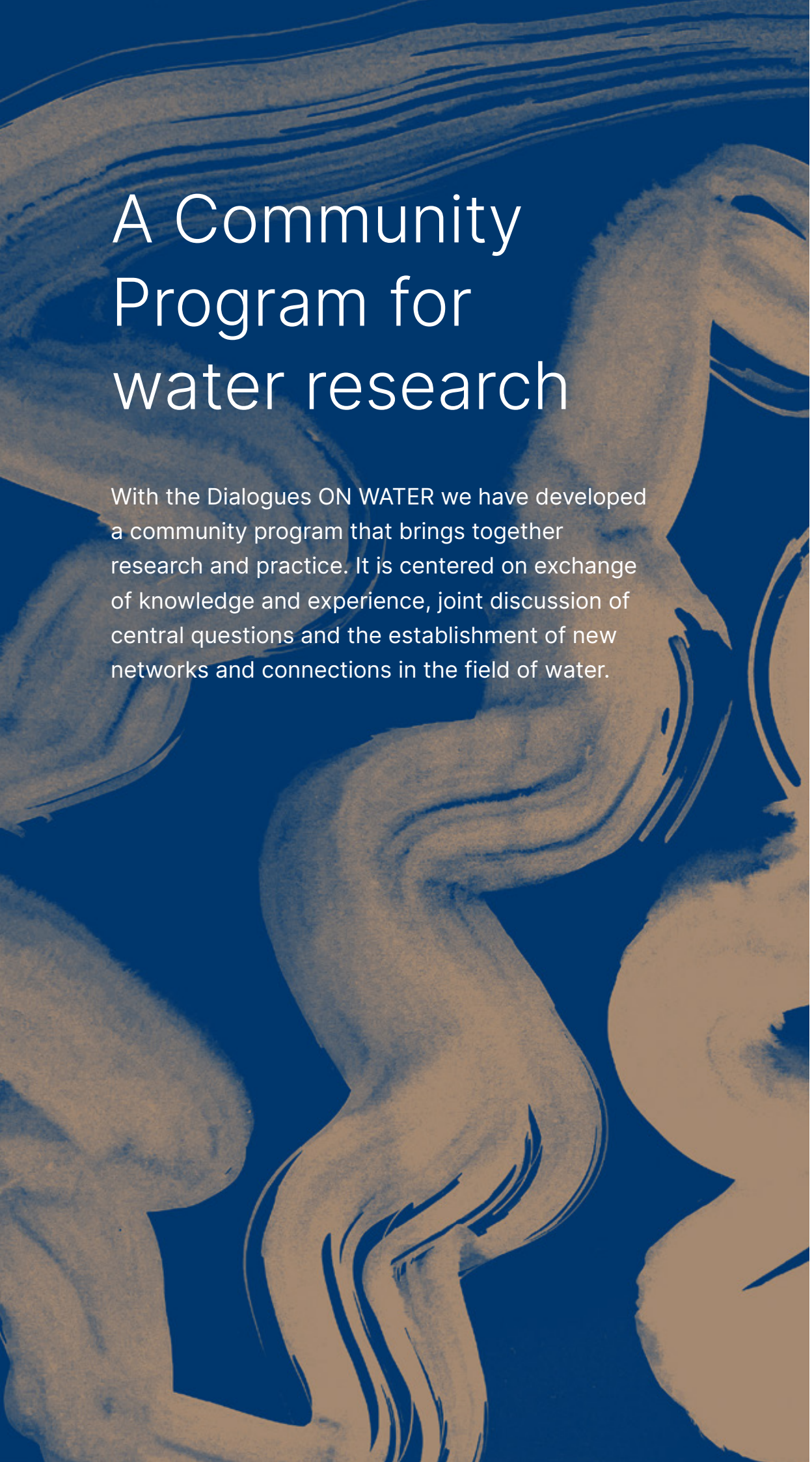
Photo: Alexander Rentsch

TD-Lab – Laboratory for Transdisciplinary Research

The TD-Lab – Laboratory for Transdisciplinary Research of the Berlin University Alliance strengthens the transdisciplinary mode of research within the network of excellence, supporting the network in its efforts to put Berlin on the map as a place of integrative research. To this end, we enable scientists and civil-society stakeholders to perform joint research and establish lasting structures for transdisciplinary cooperation – both at a personal and an institutional level. We develop our own formats and bring them to the methodology debate within the national and international transdisciplinary research community.

OUR BASIC UNDERSTANDING OF TRANSDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

Transdisciplinarity is a mode of research which merges research findings with knowledge from practice. The expertise from individual scientific disciplines alone is not enough to face up to the pressing challenges of our time, such as the climate crisis, the digital transformation and global health. These challenges require the combination of practical know-how and joint research in order to understand the changes in society. Transdisciplinary research generates both scientific knowledge gain and application-oriented solutions to problems by bringing together academic and non-academic stakeholders. They agree on how to cooperate in order to obtain insights and develop concrete solutions. This means that transdisciplinarity is more than one-off participation in research projects. It is a new understanding of how to utilize knowledge and include the public in research.



A Community Program for water research

With the Dialogues ON WATER we have developed a community program that brings together research and practice. It is centered on exchange of knowledge and experience, joint discussion of central questions and the establishment of new networks and connections in the field of water.

STARTING POINT

Which issues did the Dialogues ON WATER tackle?

The Berlin University Alliance supports the development of solutions to the Grand Challenges – the central challenges of the future – by promoting and supporting joint research with society stakeholders. One of these Grand Challenges is the issue of water – too much water, not enough water, polluted water.

The BUA describes the research focus of this Grand Challenge as Climate and Water Under Change (CliWaC). Water is also a focus topic for the BUA knowledge exchange (see page 10) in order to promote a multidirectional approach to its exploration and to initiate an exchange between researchers, as well as their questions and findings, and the public.

This is also where the ***Dialogues ON Water Community Program*** comes into play. It supports the establishment of a *Community of Practice* between researchers and technical experts in the field of water. By designing the Dialogues as a transferable model they have become a structured program that can strengthen transdisciplinary research and networking in the long term (see → Goals).

Photo: Jan-Christoph Hartung

Focus ON WATER: Berlin‘s water research in exchange with the public

It shapes landscapes, defines cultures, penetrates organisms and systems. It is omnipresent, fundamental, precious: Water is an inexhaustible research topic. The ON WATER program for water knowledge in Berlin brings to life what the Berlin University Alliance stands for – collaborative research, participation and the conviction that we can achieve more if we work together. ON WATER brings together scientific points of view, it transcends disciplines and it breaks new ground when it comes to finding joint answers to the water problems of the future. With the ON WATER research priority the Berlin University Alliance offers various different access routes into Berlin’s water research – for researchers, the interested public and active stakeholders, for technical and specialist experts and for the people of Berlin. The DIALOGUES and PARCOURS programs were designed as complementary networking formats to bring together experts from research, politics, industry, civil-society organizations, arts and culture, and the urban community.

For further information please see:

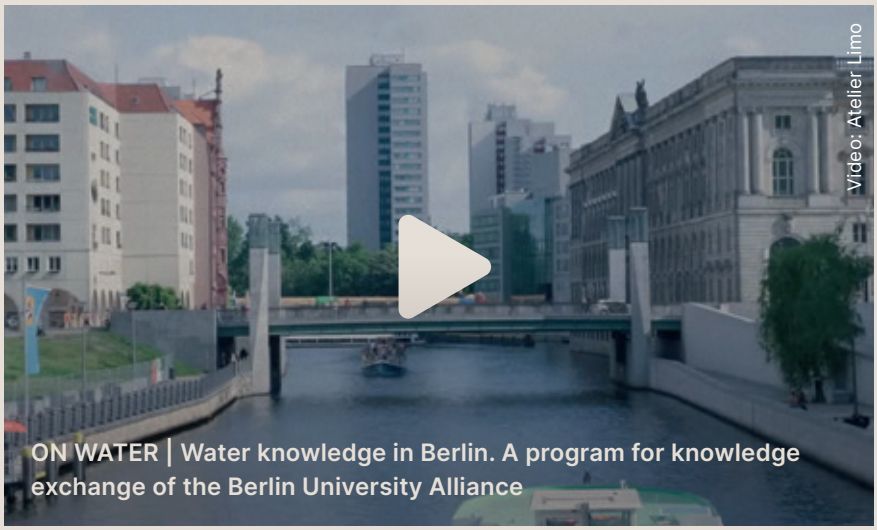
on-water-bua.de

The *“On Water: WasserWissen in Berlin“* exhibition at the Humboldt Laboratory showcases research projects of the Berlin University Alliance which take different views on the issue of water. For further information please see:

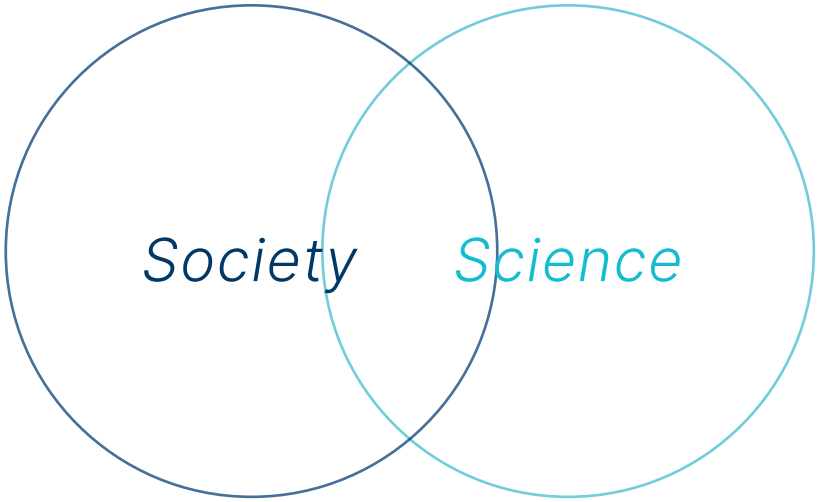
humboldt-labor.de/ausstellung

The video below *‘ON WATER | Water knowledge in Berlin. A knowledge exchange program of the Berlin University Alliance’* provides insights into the joint “Knowledge Exchange” program of the BUA:

Scan QR code to watch the Youtube video



What did we want to achieve with the Dialogues ON WATER?



Dialogues ON WATER is a program that is all about bringing together *science* and *society* and building networks in order to strengthen Berlin as an integrated research area. At TD-Lab, our particular focus is on inviting researchers from all disciplines. We aim to support them in developing forward-looking research questions as well as practical projects ready for application together with civil-society stakeholders in a transdisciplinary research mode.

The Dialogues ON WATER Community Program looked at the topic of water in all its breadth and complexity – from water research to flood disasters, from designing urban water cycles to modelling changes in the groundwater. In order to bring together the different fields of research with interested stakeholders who work in practical fields we defined the establishment of a *Community of Practice* in the field of water as a central goal. This community was also a way to refine the methods of developing transdisciplinary networks.

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Community of Practice ● is a concept used to describe networks which focus on targeted knowledge exchange, collaborative work and joint, reflective learning. These groups operate outside specific organizational and project contexts and come together to work on a specific topic or question.

Photo: Alexander Rentsch

We use the term *Community of Practice* primarily because we want to take up the idea of a community that has a common understanding of their (knowledge) resources and logic of action. In such a community it is of central importance that members actively participate in order to identify unmet needs and pro-actively explore overlaps between each other's work and interests. Knowledge of one's own capabilities as well as limitations (in terms of remit, competence and knowledge) is an essential prerequisite for an active network (see → Target group).

The reflection of such limitations leads to the necessary negotiation processes which can open up and connect, for example, disciplines or academic and social institutions. Against this backdrop a *Community of Practice* is first and foremost a concept on which we base our take on transdisciplinary networks and design our Dialogues ON WATER format. It allows to focus on similarities and connections: This makes resources accessible which are needed to meet the challenges of the future with collaborative science.

> The concept of a *Community of Practice* originates from organization theory and is used for the conception of participatory contexts (cf. Wenger (2000); Mørk et al. (2008) see → Recommendations for further reading and sources).

SUBSTANTIVE GOAL → BUILDING NETWORKS

In order to strengthen transdisciplinary and participatory research in the field of water, we designed a program with several components. These complement each other and contribute to the joint definition of sub-topics, fields of action and interfaces. The program aimed at identifying and addressing suitable persons, highlighting opportunities for cooperation and increasing the visibility of existing bodies of knowledge.

METHODOLOGICAL GOAL → DEVELOPING A FORMAT

Within these program components we also pursued the goal of developing a methodological format. For the implementation of the Dialogues we developed specific formats which provide a structured framework for the exchange of knowledge and for the creation of links between research and practice. Throughout the program we reflected on and evaluated these formats repeatedly. With the insight gained from these evaluations we continuously adapted the program. They also form the basis for our conclusions regarding transferability to similar transdisciplinary processes (see →Lessons learned).

Fig. 1: Goals and program components of the Dialogues ON WATER Community Program

Building networks for transdisciplinary research	**Developing a format** for knowledge exchange
Define fields of action / problems	Overview over current discourse / topic mining
Explore cooperation opportunities	Stakeholder mapping
Find interfaces, enrich research	Dialogue event
Make activities in the integrated research area visible	Expert briefing
Apply and disseminate knowledge	Impact workshops
⇄ **Links, synergies**	↻ **Reflections, adjustments**

What were our priorities for the Dialogues ON WATER?

The Dialogues ON WATER addressed various sub-topics and involved stakeholders from research and practice. Designed as a community program, our efforts were guided by the idea of tailored matchmaking between Berlin experts and researchers of the Berlin University Alliance as well as narrowing the discussions down to specific, relevant topics.

FOCUS → PARTICIPANTS

The Berlin University Alliance pursues the goal of making the Berlin research area integrative. In addition to encouraging cooperation between the four partners and non-university research institutions, the TD-Lab focuses in particular on strengthening the transdisciplinary mode of research, that is, the systematic integration of expert knowledge and non-academic stakeholders into research processes.

For ON WATER, this meant involving *expertise* from politics and administration, industry and civil-society organizations in a targeted manner to complement the approaches to water research taken by the various scientific disciplines. As a first step we carried out a comprehensive stakeholder mapping to provide a basic infrastructure for network building and establishing a *Community of Practice*. Based on publicly available information we drew up an overview of relevant individuals and organizations in the topic area of water which we updated regularly.

Invitations for the individual Dialogues ON WATER were managed on the basis of this list in order to connect the suitable expertise and institutions for specific topics. .

As the program progressed, the list grew to approximately 1,100 entries (see Fig. 2), making it the cornerstone for community building during the Dialogues ON WATER.

Photo: Alexander Rentsch

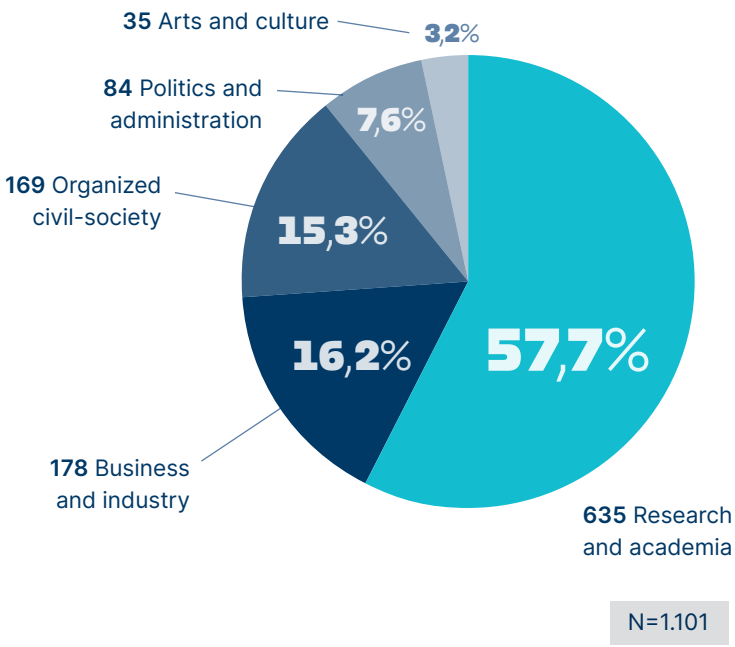


Fig. 2: Stakeholder mapping of individuals from research and practice.

FOCUS → TOPICS

In addition to the stakeholder mapping, we analyzed topics that occupy research and practice in Berlin in the field of water: Which sub-topics feature most frequently? Which interfaces exist between practice and research? And where are the gaps?

To address these issues systematically and narrow down the topics for the Dialogues ON WATER, we compiled comprehensive media digests on various subject areas. They looked into how certain topics ranging from water scarcity to security of supply to infrastructure issues were discussed by different stakeholders in Berlin.

Debates were analyzed on the basis of various publicly accessible publications in the Berlin area, including scientific studies, political papers, media reports and reports from civil-society initiatives and businesses. Both global links and specific local factors were taken into account in order to understand the topics in their respective contexts. The digest focused on publications from early 2024 onwards. Older publications were included in some instances for contextualization.

The digests on the various topics were compiled by polisphere on behalf of TD-Lab (see → Community Program: Partners). A total of 42 sub-topics were systematically developed (see exemplary excerpt on the next page; a complete overview is available on our website). They determined the focus of the priority topics for each of the Dialogues ON WATER, structuring the exchange within the emerging *Community of Practice*.

Overview of sub-topics currently debated in relation to water

Links between climate change and water shortage	Anthropogenic factors influencing water scarcity and droughts	Security of supply despite water shortages	Heat stress and health impacts of drought	
Economic dimension of water scarcity	Sponge city and blue-green infrastructure	 Photo: Jan-Christoph Hartung.	Water resilience	
Measures to ensure the supply of drinking water		Drinking water quality	Water use in agriculture	Photo of drought: IssamBarhoumi, Wikimedia Commons
Links between drinking water and health	Technologies for supply and management of water	Wastewater infrastructure		Photo: PublicDomain
Stabilization, connectivity and monitoring of (small) bodies of water	Waterway traffic	Environmental compatibility of technology	Water management in food production	
Conflicts and solutions in urban water supply	Conflicts of use in urban bodies of water	Conflicts of use with industry	Conflicts of use: Tesla	

FIND ALL TOPICS AT: **on-water-bua.de/de/themen**

Tourism in the context of water scarcity	Groundwater protection	Impact of water scarcity on flora and fauna	Impact of water scarcity on soil and land management
Approaches and measures to tackle water scarcity	 Photo: Jan-Christoph Hartung		Security of drinking water supply
Climate impacts on agriculture	Innovations and measures in food production	Fishing	Just distribution of food and water
Safety and crisis preparedness in the critical water infrastructure	Technology in the context of water and energy	Predicting and managing floods	Predicting and managing droughts and water scarcity
Technology-based urban development following the sponge city principle	Unsealing	 Photo: Alexander Rentsch	Water pollution control
Conflicts of use with agriculture	Global inequalities and distribution issues	Water in geopolitical conflicts	Climate migration and water refugees

Who helped us implement the Dialogues ON WATER?

We designed and implemented the ON WATER Community Program together with polisphere, a think tank, consulting network and service provider with many years of experience in the development and support of professional communities and in political communication (**https://polisphere.eu**). polisphere supported the Community Program with various different formats and services, including social media and discourse analyses, stakeholder mapping, technical briefing newsletters as well as planning, implementing and evaluating the Dialogue and subsequent impact events.
With the support of polisphere the program was designed as a template for the topic of “water” and successfully dovetailed target group-oriented community activation, knowledge exchange and impact. It is generally transferable to other subject areas.


Photo: Alexander Rentsch

The ON WATER video, which provides a sneak preview of the comprehensive program from the BUA’s “Objective Knowledge Exchange” (see → Starting point), was produced for us by Atelier Limo (**www.atelier-limo.eu**).

How did we promote networking?

The goal of the Community Program was to strengthen the networks between research and practice. In addition to the Dialogue events, a technical briefing, enhanced by an AI-supported knowledge transfer tool, was sent out on a monthly basis.

The technical briefings provided an ongoing framework for communication that linked up the individual Dialogues, offering preparation on the respective topics and additional information throughout. In addition to the events the briefings created a backdrop of continuous exchange which supported the building of a *Community of Practice*.

TECHNICAL BRIEFINGS

On a monthly basis, the technical briefings ON WATER provided up-to-date information from research, politics, media reporting and current practice on different focus topics from the field of water. They were compiled and edited by TD-Lab with support from polisphere in the production of the newsletter. In the period from October 2024 to February 2026, a total of 16 issues of the technical briefings were sent as e-mail newsletters.

Here you can access all editions of the briefing in German

Each issue contained:

- An editorial on the current topic
- A portrait and paper from a Berlin water researcher
- Reports on current developments, debates and studies
- A news bulletin on various different focus topics in the field of water
- An overview of current water-related events
- Web finds

Representatives from academia and practice subscribed to the technical briefings in equal parts (N=202, as of February 2026). This illustrates the important contribution they made to the exchange of knowledge between the two target groups. What is more, at consistently above 50 per cent the open rate was very high for an email newsletter.

AI-BASED SCIENCE COMMUNICATION

Together with the digital platform Gistable we made current water research from Berlin accessible to a wider audience as part of the technical briefings. The platform produces easily understandable audio and text summaries from complex studies and scientific papers.

A number of papers from Berlin researchers featured in the briefings were transferred into “gists”, which are concise, AI-generated summaries. The papers were subsequently made available in different language versions, as a detailed version with more technical language and as a podcast version (see example in the box).

A parallel feedback process with the authors ensured that the content was rendered correctly and appropriately.

Browse through research findings from Berlin here:

Scan QR code to listen to the podcast

Fig. 3: AI-generated audio file on the platform (Gistable 2026).

Drought shock: Satellite images belie crop losses.

Fabio Brill, Pedro Henrique Lima Alencar, Huihui Zhang +3

Photo: Jan-Christoph Hartung

The networking events

The central element of our Community Program for water research in Berlin were the eponymous Dialogues ON WATER, a participatory workshop format designed to facilitate structured networking. Their aim was to promote the *exchange of knowledge between academic and non-academic stakeholders*, bring together specific expertise, foster multi-perspective thinking, and to lay the groundwork for collaborations and transdisciplinary projects as a result.


Photo: Alexander Rentsch

We held six Dialogues ON WATER at different locations between October 2024 and December 2025 – some in cooperation with different partners. The topics were chosen based on preliminary research (see → Focus: Topics).

OVERVIEW OF THE DIALOG EVENTS

→ "In the flow together: Collaborations, knowledge and research agendas on water in Berlin" at the Floating University on October 28, 2024. The focus was on the need for and areas of application of transdisciplinary and cross-sectoral cooperation in water research in Berlin. As this was the kick-off event, we mainly wanted to reach out to the community and find out about their needs with regard to topics, exchange and networking as well as research questions.

→ "Data flows: Data for Berlin's water future" on February 5, 2025. In this event we took up the topic that featured most strongly at the kick-off event. The discussion focused on the urgent need for structures that enable the sharing of water data and the fact that institutions are often lacking knowledge which has already been obtained and analyzed elsewhere. Joining up this knowledge was a particular concern of the participants.

→ "High and dry? Water scarcity and heat in Berlin" at the Humboldt Laboratory as part of the World Water Day on March 22, 2025. The link between heat and health in cities was at the center of discussions. It was pointed out that despite relevant research little is still known about the real impact of heat.

→ "Conflicts over urban spaces: Urban solidarity and water justice" in the Spreefeld housing project on July 16, 2025. This time two transdisciplinary research projects gave insights into their collaboration and offered a soundwalk as a supporting program. The central question was how to address and implement urban solidarity.

→ **"Water cycles in the City: A visit to the Roof Water Farm"** on September 22, 2025 was conceived as a summer fair in collaboration with the ON WATER Parcours program, which aims to facilitate knowledge exchange about water with artistic methods. In this session the participants mainly discussed the lack of (procedural and) technical knowledge required to plan buildings that would put the idea of a sponge city into practice. They also explored how decision-makers could be approached.

→ **"Innovations for a water-resilient region":** Dialogue ON WATER at the GFZ Helmholtz Center for Geosciences in Potsdam on November 3, 2025. This event took place as an excursion during the Berlin Science Week. It enabled exchange between academic and non-academic stakeholders from Brandenburg and Berlin on the extensive topic of water innovations at the Helmholtz Center. Gaps mentioned during the talks included lack of data harmonization and knowing where specific water data can be found.

FROM THE CONCEPT PAPER

WORKSHOPS

Workshops ● are a central element in transdisciplinary research. They help to integrate knowledge and often use dialogical methods for the exchange between stakeholders and researchers (cf. Defila/Di Giulio 2015). The Dialogues ON WATER were not intended as a classic workshop format within a specific research project and not exclusively focused on co-exploration. Nevertheless, knowledge exchange, thematic focus and networking are basic prerequisites for participatory research. The joint identification of research gaps or missing practical relevance as well as meeting highly committed stakeholders who work on similar topics – all of this happens in dialogue processes where different perspectives, questions and concerns come together. Structuring and facilitating them is the task of workshops that enable newly emerging working relations to grow for the long term.

With our Dialogues ON WATER we have developed a workshop format that methodically supports the first steps towards the integration of knowledge – a thematically focused space where different actors can come together, get to know each other and explore common areas of interest.

TARGET GROUP

Whom did the Dialogues ON WATER reach?

Photo: Alexander Rentsch

A clearly defined target group was the starting point of the Dialogues ON WATER format. The networking events were intended to bring together people who have specific knowledge about water because of their work or scientific or volunteer activities and are motivated to work together to bring about solutions through research.

We addressed people who:

- work in research projects, in particular within the Berlin University Alliance, but also in other Berlin universities and non-university research institutions
- work in start-ups developing innovative solutions to water-related challenges in the region
- work on water issues in municipal administration
- work in the water sector
- or volunteer for causes related to water

Bringing together many different perspectives and experiences was more than a minor aspect for us, but rather a central prerequisite for the transdisciplinary exchange we sought.

Photo: Jan-Christoph Hartung

MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT

To attract participants for the events and ongoing involvement in the Community Program a targeted approach was essential. Since we were looking for stakeholders who had specific knowledge on and experience in different water-related topics, we decided to address them as water experts in research and practice. In the "research" category we wanted to reach those who explicitly worked in scientific projects and, for the most part, were affiliated with the four BUA members. "Practitioners" referred to those working in organizations, companies and other settings that approach water topics in a more practical way, such as civil-society initiatives, water companies or water administration authorities, and that shape urban water policy. We addressed all these stakeholders as experts, regardless of their affiliation, as they are carriers of relevant knowledge and potential co-creators of a joint *Community of Practice*.

We are aware that expertise is an ambivalent concept because it is not clearly defined and can lead to certain kinds of knowledge being excluded. What kind of knowledge qualifies as 'expertise' is negotiable and depends on the context in which it is to be deployed. We decided to use the term, because firstly, we deliberately expanded the definition of 'expertise' by specifically including various different sectors (e.g. 'research and practice'). Secondly, we wanted to be sure that our events were not misunderstood as mediation or education formats that teach about water-related topics. By limiting access to the program we ensured that participants in our events met others who also had specific knowledge.

EXPERTS

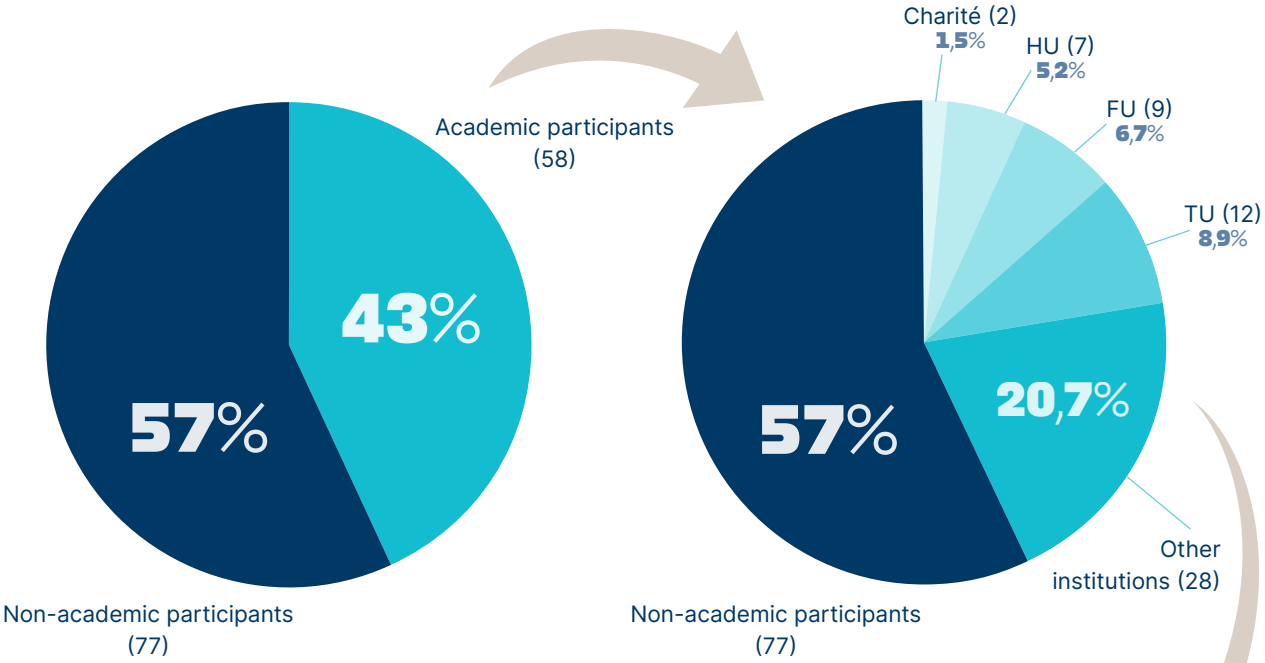
Photo: Alexander Rentsch

Experts • in our view, are those who make their knowledge explicit and reflect on it. They have a broad understanding of their subject area, which allows them to speak both about their existing knowledge and name gaps (see below →Method). Expertise is not only revealed by a certain level of technical detail, but also by the ability to assess uncertainties as well as the limits of one's own subject, field or topic. For us, this reflected knowledge – including awareness of that which is not (yet) known – forms the basis upon which common ground can be explored. It is precisely this form of expertise that we wanted to address with our target group and activate for the Dialogues ON WATER.

PARTICIPANTS' EVALUATION OF THE DIALOGUES ON WATER

Fig. 4: A network for research and practice – evaluation of participants

Total participants (135) from research and practice



The following are some of the organizations represented by participants:

- Grüne Liga
- Kompetenzzentrum Wasser Berlin
- Ecologic Institute
- Regenwasseragentur
- Floating ~~University~~
- CollActive Materials experimental laboratory
- BUND Berlin
- ARL - Academy for Territorial Development in the Leibniz Association
- MARIS Berlin Brandenburg
- Chamber of Industry and Commerce Berlin
- KLUG German Alliance on Climate Change and Health
- Ökowerk Berlin e.V.
- Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research
- Berliner Hochschule für Technik

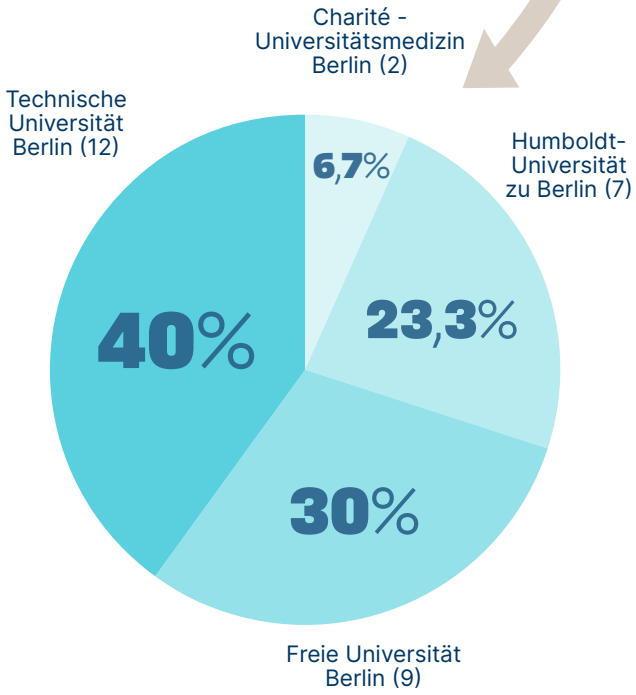


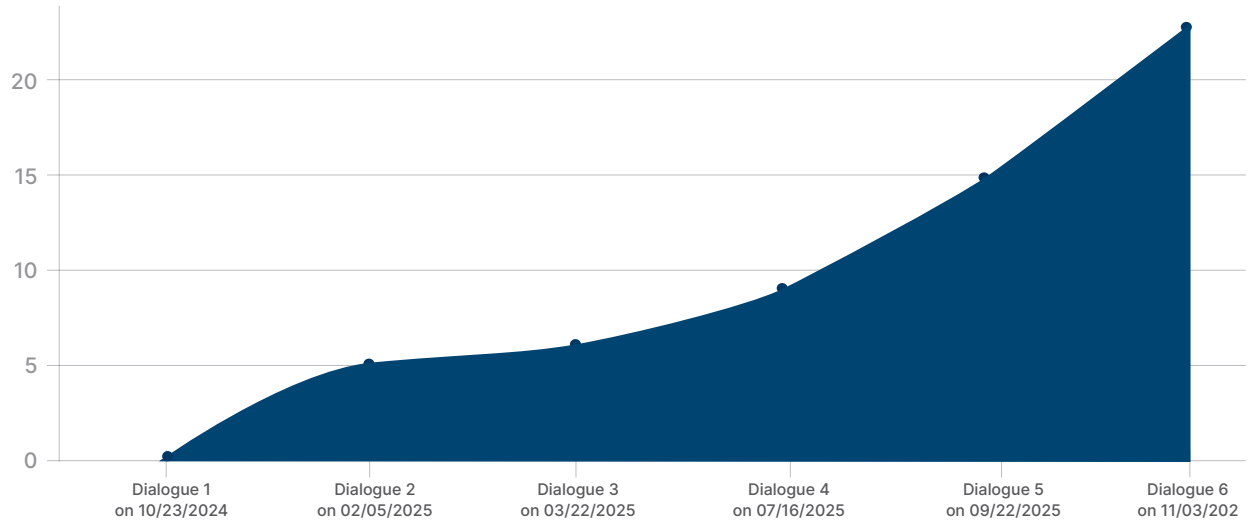
Fig. 5: Affiliation with the BUA members

RECRUITMENT

We asked our project partner polisphere (see →Partners) to perform a systematic stakeholder analysis to help us recruit participants (see →Focus). It included individuals and institutions addressed by our program.
This stakeholder mapping enabled us to target invitations to our events specifically, ensuring a balanced ratio of academic and non-academic participants and reflecting the approach that was taken in the analysis.

The idea of the Dialogues ON WATER was to attract stakeholders who work in various different fields and are already pro-actively networking. The fact that 60 per cent of the participants took part in several events shows that a majority appreciated our offer to build a community.

Fig. 6: Repeat participation in events



Cumulative repeat participation of 135 individuals in the Dialogue events.

How exactly should I picture the Dialogues ON WATER?


Photo: Alexander Rentsch

The Dialogues ON WATER are designed as half-day events of four hours each, which means the time investment for interested parties is manageable. We conducted six Dialogues altogether using our time schedule which was aligned to the needs and requirements of our target group. As the program progressed, a few new elements were added. Below we share our ideal schedule, which we adapted further as necessary.

TIME SCHEDULE OF THE DIALOGUES	
13:00	Arrival of participants
13:10	Welcome and warm-up game of memory
13:30	Input lectures from research and practice on the topic of the event
14:15	Break with drinks and snacks
14:30	'Knowledge Atlas': Tool to identify needs and interfaces with the questions relating to the topic of the event
16:00	Presentation of outcomes from the discussion
16:20	Wrap-up: Yes, and... Joint storytelling exercise
16:30	Conclusion and open exchange
17:00	End of the event

BASIC SETUP

Timing:
Our target group takes part in the Dialogues as part of their work or research activities. This meant that we held the events largely on weekdays and during core working hours (with one exception). Our aim was to create equal opportunities for participation.

Venues:
It was also important to choose easily accessible venues. We opted for venues that are well connected to public transport in Berlin and also to the topic of water. We held events near bodies of water or in the facilities of cooperation partners which were suited to the topic of the respective event.

VARIATIONS

We varied the time schedule as the Dialogues progressed and added a supporting program: At the *"Conflicts over Urban Spaces"* Dialogue event we were joined by the artist Lucio Telles who is part of the research project 'Riparian Struggle'. At the end of the day, he offered to take us on a sound walk along the river Spree near the venue (see box on the right).

Together with the Brazilian artist and activist Lucio Telles the Team of ***Riparian Struggles*** **(www.ripariansstruggles.org)** invites you to enjoy an English-language sound walk along the river Spree, in which letters to the river Saracura in São Paulo are read out. A transnational audio walk that draws a line between local and global struggles over water, remembrance and justice.

→ Access the sound walk:
soundwalk.carrd.co

Scan the QR code to listen to the sound walk.

The artist Lucio Telles from the 'Riparian Struggles' research project.

Dr. Grit Bürgow in the greenhouse of Roof Water Farm.

Guided tour of Roof Water Farm: Engineer Erwin Nolde explaining graywater treatment by means of filters.

The *"Water Cycles in the City"* Dialogue took place together with the ON WATER Parcours on the premises of Roof Water Farm. This living lab in the center of Berlin demonstrates the possibilities of sponge cities. The feasibility of urban farming and water cycles for hydroponic systems – i.e. plant cultivation in water instead of soil – are tested here in real-life conditions.

Photos: Alexander Rentsch

The *"Innovations for a water-resilient region"* Dialogue was held in the form of an excursion to the GFZ Helmholtz Center for Geosciences in Potsdam. We traveled there in a group with the participants from Berlin. The event began with a guided tour of the Telegrafenberg, a historic science park where the GFZ is located.
We changed the format of this Dialogue slightly so as to better integrate the difference in perspectives of participants from Berlin and Brandenburg. Instead of two input lectures we heard six short pitches on topics from current research and practice in both regions. This allowed a condensed glimpse at the different work contexts and provided starting points for further conversations.

Guided tour of the Telegrafenberg science park in Potsdam during the Dialogue at the GFZ Helmholtz Center.

Photos: Alexander Rentsch

METHOD

What tools did we use?

To achieve our goal of enabling the structured exchange and networking of participants from research and practice during the Dialogues ON WATER, we used, adapted and combined various different methodological tools which support the integration of knowledge bases. In this chapter, we provide an overview of the tools that carried us through the agenda of each event, going through them one by one in the order in which they were used.

PREPARATION

Setting topics and formulating questions
We determined the main focus for each of the Dialogues based on the previously established fields (see → Focus: Topics) as well as the needs of academic and non-academic stakeholders in Berlin. Each Dialogue event was also framed by an overarching central question which provided guidance for both the input lecturers and the host of the event. It also structured work on the 'Knowledge Atlas' (see below).
For example, for the Dialogue on water justice, we formulated the question: What kind of knowledge is needed to design urban (water) spaces in a way that is solidarity-based and ecologically resilient?
Our aim was not to find a conclusive answer. Rather, the precise wording of the question was intended to provide guidance – for the input contributions, the discussions and for the work of the group.

Inviting speakers for the input lectures
We also asked the speakers to reflect on specific questions in the preparation of their inputs. These included questions such as: What kind of knowledge do you bring to the table? Where do you identify gaps? Where do you see the need for more research? Which knowledge gaps could be filled through cooperation between research and practice? And what kind of partnerships would be necessary for this?
Guided by this focus on knowledge and its limits we consistently organized the events in a way that allowed for a maximum of structured discussion. The aim was for the participants to perceive themselves as carriers of different kinds of specific expertise and to be able to address each other as such.

Setting up the venue
Upon entering the room it should already be clear that everything is all about working

together. Instead of a stage and theater-style seating arrangements, the participants find a workshop atmosphere with group tables – the game plan for the 'Knowledge Atlas' laid out, colored index cards, marker pens and notepads at the ready. Even though the 'Knowledge Atlas' is only used in the second half of the event, the aim is to create an inviting, work-oriented atmosphere in the room from the outset. The focus is on being active and using the materials and space available to start talking to each other.

There was a lot of knowledge to share at the Dialogue event on water data in February 2025

Memory game

Upon registration participants receive a card with an aquatic animal, which they keep on their person throughout the event.

→ HOW TO PLAY:
After participants have been welcomed to the event, they are asked to find other people in the room who have the same animal on their card. To do so, they mingle with the others to find their counterparts, forming groups of two or three per animal. Five minutes are allowed for participants to make their introductions in the small groups. The cards suggest three succinct pieces of information to share (name, work background or organization, favorite place related to water in Berlin). Afterwards, the newly formed pairs or small groups introduce each other to the other participants.

→ GOAL:
The 'getting to know you' memory game is a classic icebreaker. Encouragement to move through the room and the playful approach to introductions make it easier to talk to one another and to establish common ground. It also helps overcome inhibitions, as every participant has to speak in front of the group at least once. This exercise signals that this is an open space where different perspectives are welcome and heard.

→ MATERIALS:
- Animal cards
- Space to move around, ideally enough to form a circle for the introductions

Input lectures

The second element of the Dialogue events are the thematic inputs from research and practice. In an actual Dialogue ON WATER, two individuals or groups introduce the topic of the event from either an academic or application-oriented perspective.

→ ORGANIZATION:
Following a short introduction by the facilitator, the invited speakers each give an input lecture from their work context of about ten minutes, usually supported by a short presentation with a maximum of three concise slides. After the lecture approximately 20 minutes are allowed for questions, feedback and initial discussion with the participants.

The Floating University and the *'Climate and Water under Change (CliWaC)'* BUA project in conversation about the need for cooperation.

→ GOALS:
The purpose of the input lectures is to highlight various different perspectives and demonstrate different approaches to a given topic in both research and practice. The lectures provide momentum for the subsequent networking by showcasing certain projects and work contexts. At the same time, their problem-oriented focus opens up a new perspective on existing knowledge, knowledge gaps and possibilities for innovation and cooperation. These aspects are followed up by the tool below, the → Knowledge Atlas.

Tobias Otte, Scientific Coordinator of the *'Climate and Water under Change (CliWaC)'* BUA project at the first Dialogue event.

→ MATERIALS:
- Space for a presentation in front of the group
- Screen and presentation equipment
- Motivated speakers

Photos: Jan-Christoph Hartung

Knowledge Atlas

The central tool of the Dialogues is the knowledge atlas, a group project to collect and link up existing knowledge*. It allows participants to compile the knowledge and expertise in as well as experience with the respective topic which they bring to the event, possible problems that might arise in connection with the topic and approaches to potential solutions.


Photo: Alexander Rentsch

In contrast to the input lectures, this part of the event is not about conveying specific content. Instead it is an opportunity for participants to exchange knowledge and explore common ground between their areas of work and also the gaps with which they struggle in their work. This can be due to a lack of knowledge or insights, missing data, or a lack of techniques or skills.

→ PREPARATION:
Each of the tables are surrounded by four chairs and equipped with a game plan for the knowledge atlas printed on large format paper as well as a brief guide with the central questions for each of the fields. Also provided are pens and index cards in the colors of the fields of the atlas game plan.
A key question that relates to the topic of the event is placed on the middle field of the atlas.

* Cf. Technologiestiftung Berlin (ed.): Public Service Design. Handbook for innovative work in administration, 4th edition, Berlin 2024, pp. 102-105.

→ ORGANIZATION:
Participants sit at the prepared tables in groups of four. The facilitator explains the knowledge atlas rules and timeline (duration: 90 minutes).

1) Reflection (5 minutes): This initial phase is set aside to allow participants to familiarize themselves with the game plan and to reflect for themselves what kind of knowledge and experience they bring to the key question.

2) Work at the group table (60 minutes): The groups work together to fill in fields on the game plan. At first the facilitator introduces the fields and repeats the individual fields and the questions related to them as the exercise progresses. The prompts in the fields on the game plan guide the conversation:

Field A – EXPERTISE (10 minutes): Who are you and what expertise do you bring to the table? What is your job title and how do you work? Which topics do you work on?
→ Introduce yourself to your group

» KNOWLEDGE ATLAS

Field B – LINKS (25 minutes): In what way does the topic impact your work (e.g. water data, design of water spaces, water cycles)? Which specific knowledge related to the topic/question do you have? What knowledge is missing for your work? What challenges are you facing in practice?
→ Share your knowledge, explore links between each other's research and practice and try to find out in how far they overlap with each other and the key question or how far they are apart.

Field C – GAPS (25 minutes): Which questions remain open at your table? Which missing knowledge, insight or lack of skills have you identified? What else would be helpful to support work on the topic? What more is needed?
→ Work together to find out what would help you with your work.

3) Summary and discussion with all participants (20 minutes): What surprised you? Which similarities and differences did you identify? Did any links or overlaps emerge? What is missing – and how could the gaps be closed? What else is needed?
→ All participants move together from table to table with each group presenting their main findings as their table is visited. At the end the facilitator summarizes the main points.

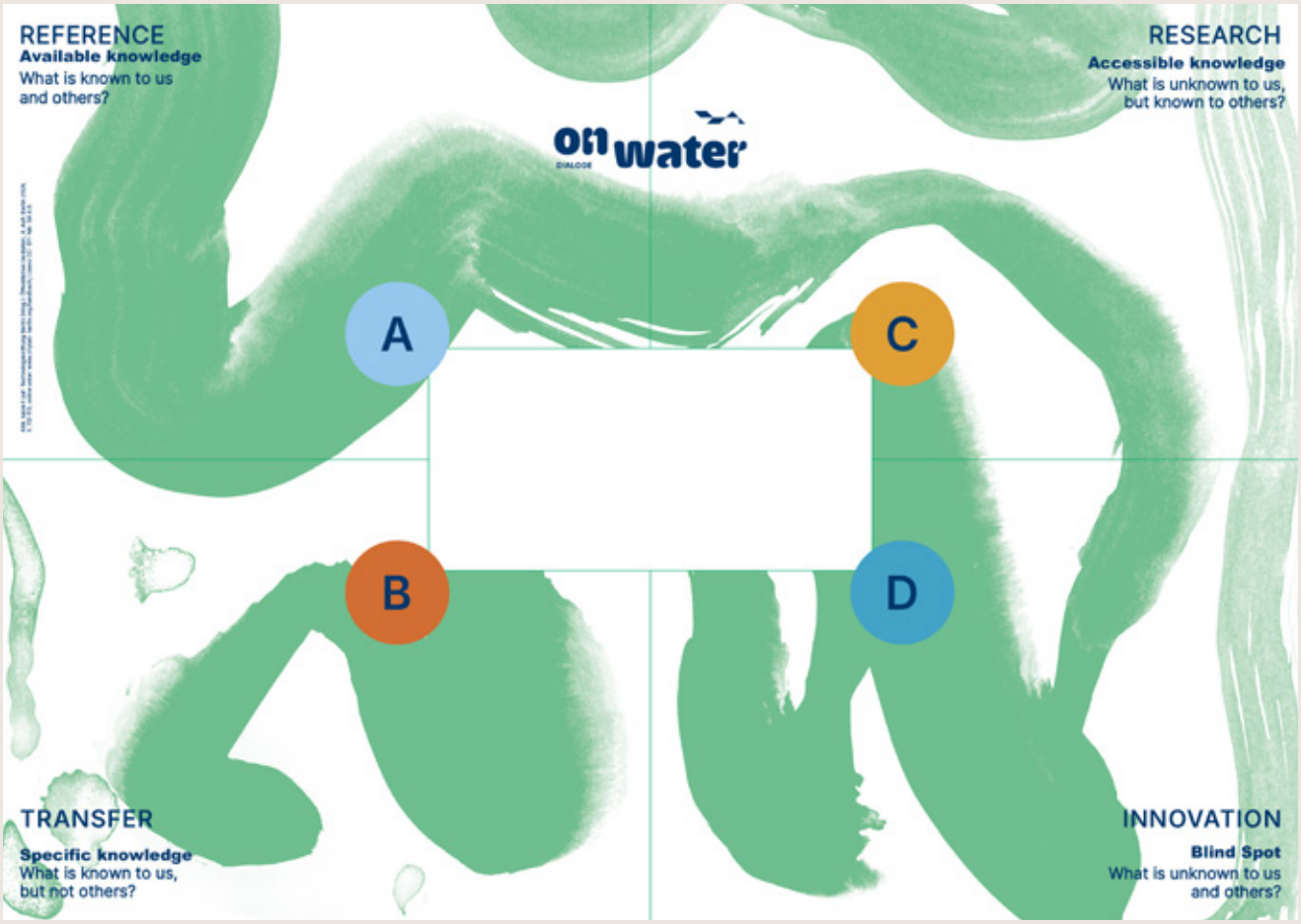
4) Final question: Who would like to stay in touch? Participants who would like to continue the exchange with other members of the group can put their name down on a list and will be contacted by email after the event.

→ GOAL:
The knowledge atlas is a tool which serves to connect participants from various different backgrounds in research and practice and to help them learn about each other's perspectives while identifying knowledge gaps at the same time. The aim is for participants to broaden their horizons and amplify their networks so that new collaborations can be initiated.

→ MATERIALS:
- Tables with three to four chairs each
- Knowledge atlas game plan on large format paper for each table
- Index cards in the colors of the fields on the game plan (to enable reuse of the game plans we provided index cards instead of writing directly into the fields)
- Pens
- Set of brief instructions
- Note paper, if required


Photo: Alexander Rentsch

Our knowledge atlas tool in use during the Dialogue on World Water Day at the Humboldt Laboratory



Game plan in the first version of the knowledge atlas

ADAPTATIONS OF THE KNOWLEDGE ATLAS:

Over the course of the Dialogue events we adapted and developed the goals of the atlas further:

1) At first our focus was on identifying universal knowledge gaps in the individual subject areas and on tapping into the expertise of individuals to create new collaborations at the interfaces.
Our first draft of the knowledge atlas was still rather closely based on the original from the 'Public Service Design' handbook (cf. Technologiestiftung Berlin 2024). It was designed to help participants pool their own knowledge about the topic of the event with that of the other members of the group. That is why our first adaptation of the knowledge atlas had four fields moving the groups from existing and unknown knowledge.

We used this version twice as part of the Dialogue events to observe how helpful it was in fostering exchange between participants. However, we noticed some inconsistencies in the terminology and rules of play. The most confusing concept was that of "knowledge", and especially "unknown knowledge", as in many cases comprehensive research was required to determine whether something was indeed "unknown" (see → Lessons Learned). Overall, the rules for the atlas seemed to be too specific in their wording for our purposes.

2) After the first evaluations of the format we therefore adjusted the goals of the exercise again and decided in favor of a clearer focus on the exchange of knowledge

» ADAPTATIONS OF THE KNOWLEDGE ATLAS

and against the exploration of specific issues.
What mattered more to us was to get people to talk to each other and find common ground for further cooperation whilst discussing specific topics against the backdrop of their individual practical and research experience.
And so we developed the atlas further: Instead of the four fields in the first edition, there are now only three. They guide participants through the process beginning with the identification of each participant's expertise and moving on to potential links in their experience and practical knowledge to any potential unknown knowledge, which is now given much less weight.

We used this new version on another three occasions during Dialogue events. In the process, we also found that it can be helpful to remind participants of the expert role they play in their respective fields of work, and also to think about which unmet needs they may have in their respective research or practical work. In the moderation of the events we also tried to pay more attention to questions that equally affect research and practice.

In the second edition of the knowledge atlas we reduced the presentation of the results to a simple walk-around, focusing on the similarities that were identified, surprising insights gained, and the remaining knowledge gaps.

Adapted version of the knowledge atlas used during the second half of the program

Storytelling

The Dialogues ON WATER concluded with a short collective storytelling session using the "Yes, and..." method from improvised theater. In our program it provided us with a future-oriented outlook and a positive conclusion for the temporary *Community of Practice*.

The aim of this exercise is to develop a common vision of the future in a playful and solution-focused way and to reiterate similarities and possible synergies between the participants. Improvisation invites us to leave familiar ways of thinking behind, externalize implicit knowledge and values and bring together different perspectives at eye level. It also creates an encouraging atmosphere for further conversations during the informal get-together at the end of the event.

→ ORGANIZATION:
The participants stand in a circle and develop a story together. As a starting point they are given the following scenario:

"Imagine we meet again at this very place five years from now. We find out that we have solved the problems identified today and have progressed with key challenges successfully. What would such a future be like? Which social, technical or political innovations have contributed to achieving it?"

In turn, each participant adds one to three phrases, always starting with "Yes, and...". This will give rise to a story that builds on the previous persons' contributions. The floor is passed on with a small gesture that reflects the theme of water (e.g. a wave movement with one hand or falling raindrops) until the exercise comes full circle, ending with the facilitator.

The exercise is based on the central principles of improvised theater:

- Your first idea is the best.
- "Yes, and..." instead of "Yes, but..." – it is all about building on each other's ideas, not about contradicting them.
- Trust the team and support each other.
- Make mistakes and celebrate them.
- Listening is a prerequisite of involvement.
- Breathing – it is okay to laugh at yourself.

→ GOAL:
"Yes, and..." focuses on a jointly developed positive future. This exercise strengthens trust, approachability and the willingness to cooperate, establishing a basis for networking which lasts far beyond the Dialogue event.

→ No materials needed.

How did we continue the Dialogues ON WATER?

During the work with the knowledge atlas and in the discussions during the Dialogues ON WATER, an important gap was mentioned time and again, both by stakeholders from research and practice. They both found that they lacked the skills, insights or techniques necessary to actually achieve impact with their own work. Alongside topics such as improved networking, data infrastructures or establishing water as a topic in the school curriculum, there was a clear desire for more expertise in *dealing with policy makers and public communication*.

We took this feedback on board and developed a series of three IMPACT WORKSHOPS for water research. They follow on from the TD-Lab Training Program and serve as further training of researchers and non-academic partners. The aim was to support the participants in generating not only immediate outcomes with their collaborative research, but also initiating long-term processes of change in (parts of) society.

Dialogue and excursion to the GFZ Helmholtz Center in Potsdam during the Berlin Science Week in November 2025

Gaps frequently mentioned by participants of the Dialogues ON WATER.

IMPACT WORKSHOPS FOR WATER RESEARCH

In each of the months from December 2025 to February 2026 an impact workshop was held to deal with the following topics:

→ How to write effective and concise policy briefs
The first workshop was an introduction to the format of the policy brief. This tool can be used to communicate research findings and recommendations for action to decision-makers in politics and administration. The structure, style and dissemination strategies of policy briefs were explained in the workshop. During group work phases, the participants wrote sample briefs for topics of their own.

→ Visualizing data and drawing up infographics
The second workshop focused on ideas and tools for creating clear infographics, for example to complement a policy brief and communicate outcomes in a concise manner. Among other things, the selection of suitable data sets, contextualization, typical distortions and design questions such as color scheme, structure and labeling were discussed.

→ Successful strategic science communication
In this workshop, participants developed strategies to communicate their research findings and processes in a targeted and efficient manner. They developed concrete communication roadmaps for their own research projects and received an overview of available online and offline formats that enable science communication to different target groups.

FROM THE CONCEPT PAPER

POLICY BRIEFS

Policy Briefs ● are written documents which help put topics on the agenda of political decision-makers such as members of parliament, ministers or expert desk officers in public administration.
Apart from a concise presentation of the issue and its relevance, they also contain concrete recommendations for action.
Their style differs significantly from that of a research paper, which is why drafting an effective policy brief requires some practice.
In the transdisciplinary research process, policy briefs are mostly used in the co-dissemination phase.
Thanks to the greater number of perspectives included in it, a jointly drafted policy brief by experts from research and practice can have both greater reach and more impact.

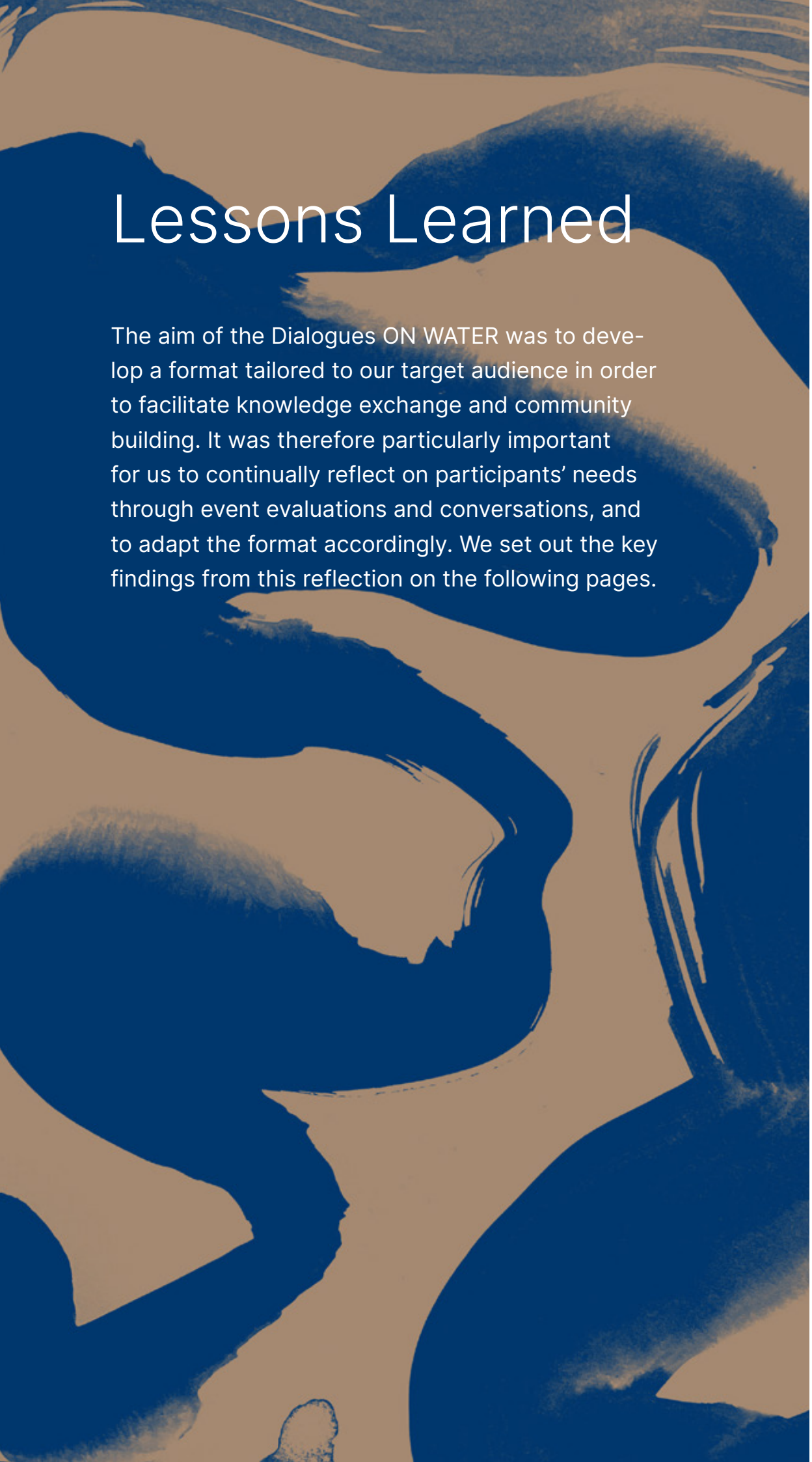
STRUCTURE OF THE WORKSHOPS

The workshops were held in the morning and lasted four hours each. Alongside the technical inputs they also comprised intensive group work phases. A long coffee break allowed time for networking. The external speakers not only imparted basic technical knowledge, but also supported the participants in its application to their own projects.
Between 14 and 20 people took part in the workshops with groups consisting of both researchers and non-academic water experts.
In addition to the workshop, we also provided a contingent of individual coaching sessions with the speakers, which could be called upon for up to four months after the end of the workshop series.

Participants and speaker Sabrina Schulz at the first impact workshop on *"How to write effective and concise policy briefs"*

→ **CONCLUSION:** As this workshop report was finalized a formal evaluation was not yet available. However, there was clearly a high demand for the workshops within the community. Participants engaged actively in the sessions and had lively discussions during the breaks.

Requests for the offered coaching sessions indicate that more time is needed to develop such formats. Especially the drafting of transdisciplinary policy briefs requires extensive coordination. With this in mind, we offered the supporting coaching sessions beyond the duration of the workshop series.



Lessons Learned

The aim of the Dialogues ON WATER was to develop a format tailored to our target audience in order to facilitate knowledge exchange and community building. It was therefore particularly important for us to continually reflect on participants' needs through event evaluations and conversations, and to adapt the format accordingly. We set out the key findings from this reflection on the following pages.

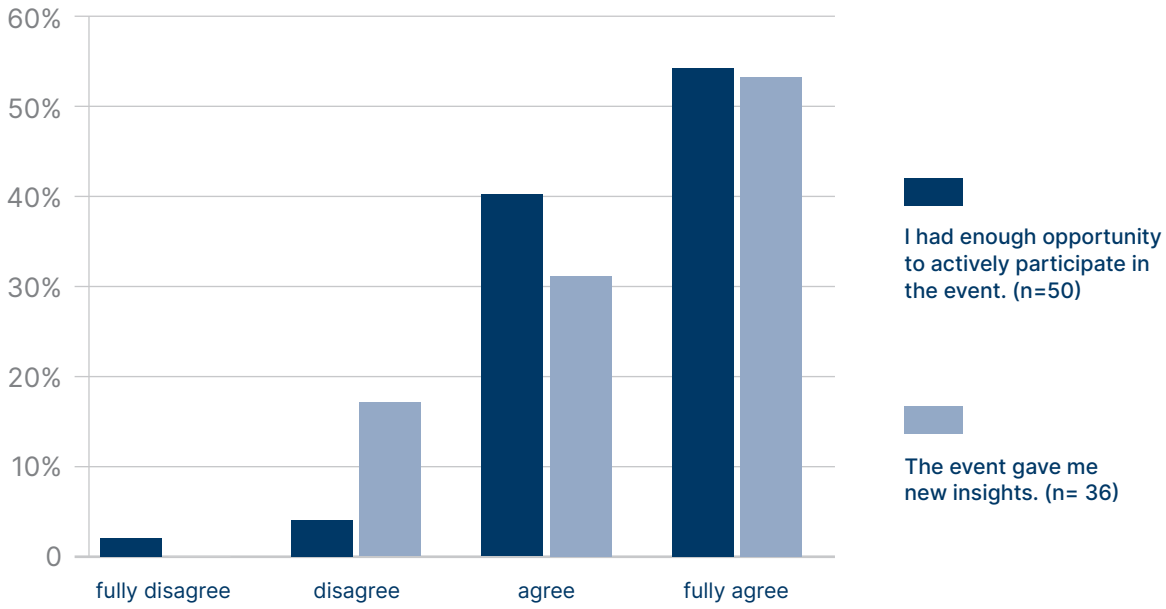


Fig. 7: Participation and knowledge gained by the participants

DEVELOPING A FORMAT FOR KNOWLEDGE SHARING

The aim of the Dialogues ON WATER was to design tools and develop a methodologically reflected format which would support the establishment of a *Community of Practice* between academic and non-academic stakeholders. In order to enable the initiation of long-term transdisciplinary collaborations a structured exchange of knowledge is essential to identify future-relevant topics and research questions in the field of water together.

In the written self-evaluation participants confirm that they had sufficient opportunity to actively participate in the events (see Fig. 7), illustrating how the format enabled the exchange of knowledge within the network. Academic and non-academic stakeholders alike were able to make their respective knowledge visible and present it to the other participants. The knowledge atlas tool supported this mutual transfer of knowledge. The high approval ratings with regard to newly gained knowledge following participation in our events testify to that.

The impact workshops proved to be an important addition to the Dialogues format. They contributed to capacity building and raised awareness of the need to include considerations about social impact, knowledge transfer and science communication from the outset in the conception of transdisciplinary research projects.

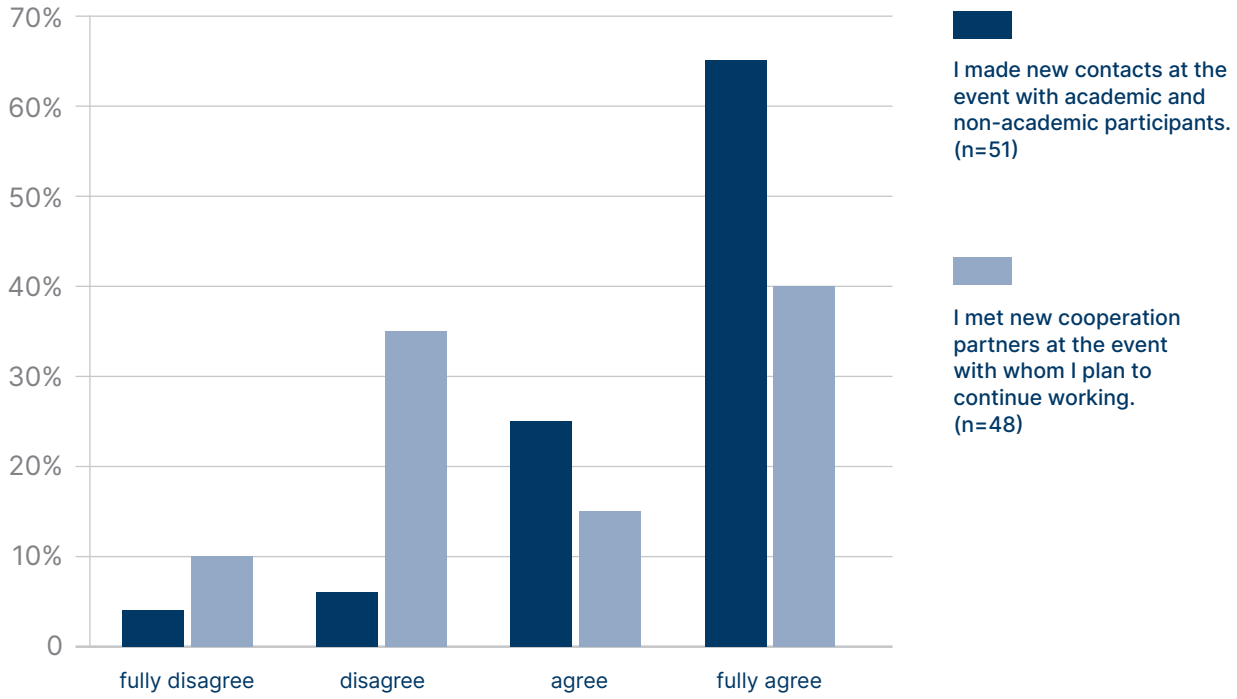
BUILDING NETWORKS FOR TRANSDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

Successful networking essentially depends on the right people from academic and non-academic backgrounds coming together in new dialogue formats. In the evaluation many participants fully agreed that the events enabled them

to make new contacts (see Fig. 8).
For us it was important to develop this network in a very focused way, oriented towards the needs of research and the daily work of our non-academic participants. With approximately 40 percent of respondents stating that they want to keep in touch with their new contacts (see Fig. 8), it is clear that the Dialogues fulfilled high expectations in terms of matching the right cooperation partners. These expectations are higher as levels of expertise increase. The systematic and detailed stakeholder mapping carried out in the run-up to the program proved to be beneficial, as it contributed to the precise selection of persons and institutions best suited to the topic at hand.

In the evaluation, the participants gave very high approval ratings to the question of whether the Dialogues ON WATER motivated them to stay involved in participatory or transdisciplinary research. Equally high ratings were given to the statement that the event demonstrated the extent to which research benefits from the inclusion of non-academic stakeholders (see Fig. 9). The input lectures at the Dialogue events illustrated this point very well.
By allowing the participants to understand how exactly research findings are applied and influence practical work the basis was created for new collaborations between academic and non-academic stakeholders. This also contributed to attainment of the overarching goal of TD-Lab, which is to initiate participatory and transdisciplinary research alliances. Increased motivation and concrete ideas for the collaborative development and valorization of research are a direct benefit for the integrated Berlin research area.

Fig. 8: New contacts and cooperation partners



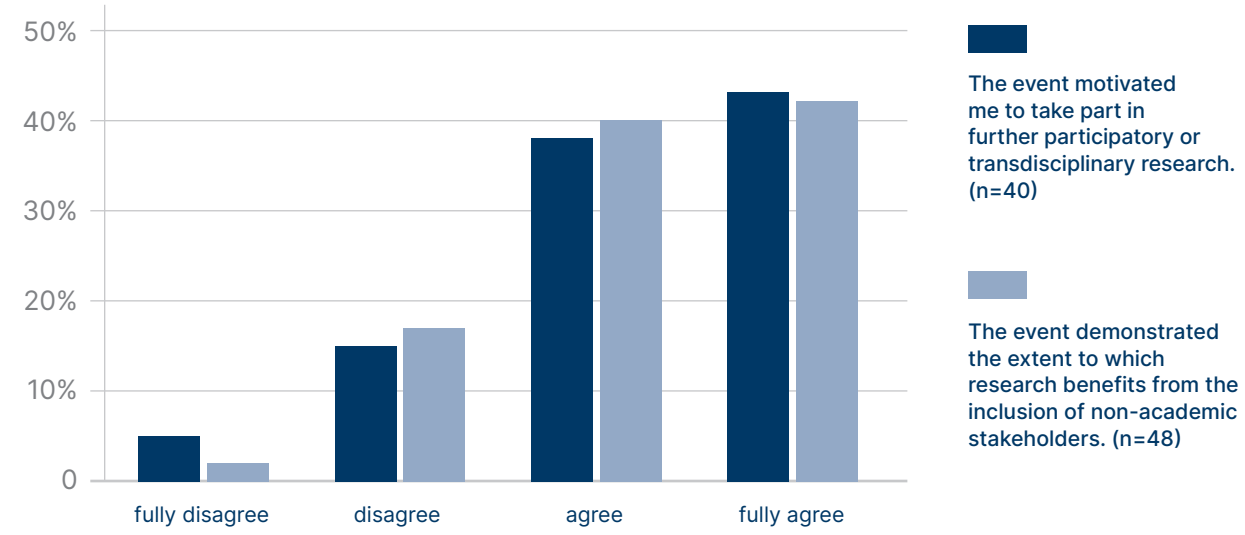


Fig. 9: Motivation of participants and added value for research

Apart from the evaluation, we also noticed during the Dialogues ON WATER that those who positioned themselves very clearly with their topics were more likely to network actively. These were participants who acknowledged the limits of their knowledge, the obstacles they had to overcome and who knew what kind of contacts they were looking for. With increasing experience in one's own subject area the approach to networking seems to become more focused and more strategic.

For the design of future formats this means that different levels of experience should be taken into account when enabling networks between academic and non-academic stakeholders. This can be done, for example, in preliminary sessions which assess the needs of candidates and bring the right people together. Example formats include moderated breakout sessions or through active match-making on the part of the facilitator when common interests between participants become apparent.

The Dialogues ON WATER follow an approach which combines various different supporting program elements as well as focused networking events. This enables the initiation of transdisciplinary collaborations and joint research questions, the integration of knowledge and the communication of research insights on a particular topic. The program is therefore particularly suitable for the preliminary phase in the run-up to a specific research project where networks are established and common interests explored (see Fig. 10 below).

Summary

We developed the Dialogues ON WATER program to open up Berlin's research landscape for more transdisciplinary research in the field of water. Our goal was to systematically combine network building and structured knowledge exchange in order to strengthen a *Community of Practice* between academic and non-academic stakeholders in the field of water.

Designed as a model and evaluated and reflected in the course of the program, Dialogues ON WATER can be transferred to other topics where exchange of information between science and society requires conceptual guidance and orientation towards research.
Within the process of transdisciplinary research, the Dialogues ON WATER can have an impact on three interlinked levels that form the framework around it (see Fig. 10):

1. Network building
How can a *Community of Practice* of academic and non-academic stakeholders be strengthened in the long term?
How can existing knowledge be made visible and linked up in a network that is focused on a specific topic?

2. Co-exploration of research questions
Which scientific questions in the field of water have not yet been sufficiently researched?
Which societal problems require new research collaborations?

3. Co-dissemination of findings
How can research findings be transferred into political, administrative or civil-society processes?
How can impact be achieved at the interface of science and society?

The *most important outcome* from the Dialogues was the repeatedly and clearly articulated need for more exchange within the academic and non-academic water community in Berlin and Brandenburg. Identifying and activating common areas of interest between the different stakeholders remains highly topical. This is illustrated by the large number of other network initiatives in the field of water in the region.
We hope that Dialogues ON WATER was able to make a contribution to further integrating these networks and strengthening transdisciplinary cooperation in the long term.

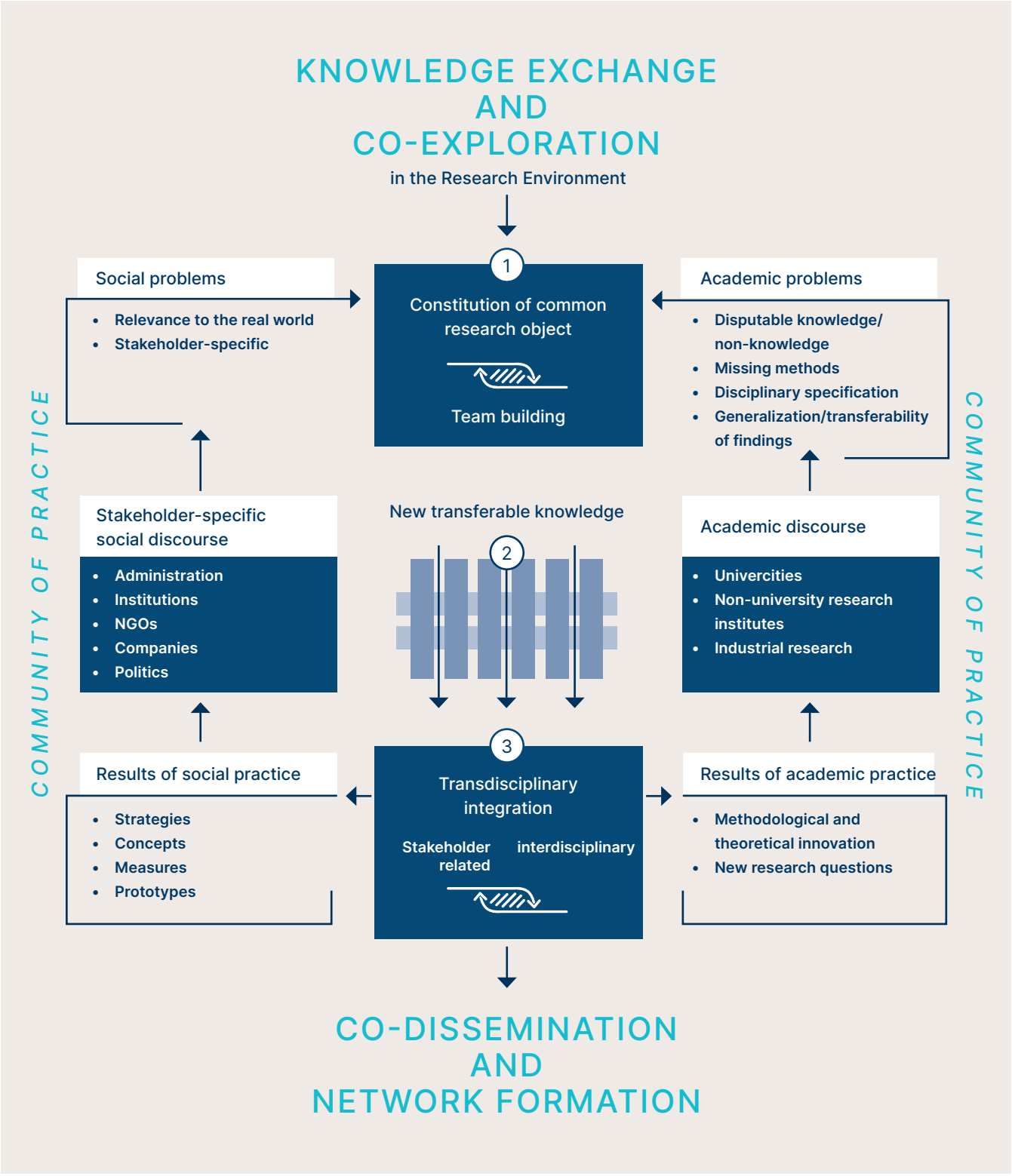


Fig. 10 Integration of the program into the transdisciplinary research process (from Jahn 2021).

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Photo: Alexander Rentsch

Imprint

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Network for research and practice
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