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OECD's Methods of Legitimation and Self-Authorisation in Water Governance

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ABSTRACT: The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has established itself since 2009 as an authority in water governance. This paper examines the strategies behind that emergence, applying quantitative and qualitative text analysis techniques to a corpus of 55 OECD documents produced between 2009 and 2022. We discern five legitimating strategies. First, the OECD followed a formula from its earlier engagement in other fields that had three components: 1) reframing existing knowledge and manufacturing a declared consensus in contentious areas, 2) formulating and disseminating blueprints for good governance, and 3) formulating and disseminating corresponding frameworks with which to evaluate performance. Its second strategy has been to stress topics and themes where it already had an established reputation, that is, 'good governance' and 'new public management'. The third strategy involved referencing a limited pool of external sources that were mostly from other international organisations and consultancy groups, and underutilising the academic literature on the subject. Fourth, it referenced itself extensively in both formal citations and frequent in-text references. Fifth and finally, it orchestrated temporary networks of actors to endorse its efforts and tools. Taken together, these strategies point to the self-referential nature of the OECD's authority in this new field. We call attention to these legitimating strategies with the goal of challenging the OECD and other international organisations to adopt more adequate and inclusive knowledge bases.

KEYWORDS: OECD, water governance, authorisation, soft power, critical discourse analysis, Structural Topic Modelling

INTRODUCTION: THE OECD AS AN AGENT IN TRANSNATIONAL GOVERNANCE

In the past two decades, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has become a major knowledge actor in global water governance. Between 2009 and 2022 its book series titled *OECD Studies on Water* produced 55 policy reports, and around the world its frameworks for designing and evaluating institutional arrangements for water governance appear popular with many governmental and non-governmental organisations in the water sector (Gurría, 2020; Woodhouse and Muller, 2017). The OECD Water Governance Indicator Framework, for example, has been applied in a number of countries including the Netherlands (see Wilschut and van der Vliet, 2025), Iran (Mirzaei et al., 2017), Argentina (Martín Velasco et al., 2023), and Finland (Jetoo, 2019).

The OECD's authority as a knowledge actor in the field of water management should not, however, be taken for granted: as recently as 20 years ago it was a relatively uninfluential organisation in this field. Research attention is thus warranted into its rise to its current position of authority and into the rhetorical strategies and tools that it has used in the process. There is a need to understand how international organisations (IOs) such as the OECD are able to create an aura of legitimacy and authority around their ideas. Such a deeper understanding will allow such authority to be challenged in cases where relatively thin empirical bases or flawed argumentation are used to support important and consequential knowledge claims and governance imperatives.

In this paper, we examine the OECD's campaign to establish itself as an authority in global water governance, a field in which it has invested significantly in the past two decades. Secondarily, we illustrate the relevance of a mixed-methods critical discourse analysis (CDA) in studying the legitimation strategies of IOs (van Leeuwen, 2008; Farrelly, 2020; Mukhtarov et al., 2022). The primary empirical basis consists of 55 reports in the *OECD Studies on Water* corpus. We also use a large body of academic articles, reports, and pieces of grey literature to interpret the data and elaborate and test our arguments. While the contents of the OECD's doctrine and its discursive and material impacts are important topics for research, this paper's main focus is instead on the strategies of legitimation that the OECD has employed to gain authority and prominence in global water governance.

For van Leeuwen (2007: 94), "legitimation [is] an answer to the spoken or unspoken 'why' question – 'Why should we do this?' or 'Why should we do this in this way?'". In our case, why should one follow the OECD's recommendations for the water sector? We identify five legitimating strategies that have been used by the OECD here. The first of these consists of a three-component script from its earlier engagement in other fields: 1) reframe existing knowledge and manufacture a declared consensus in contentious areas, 2) create and disseminate blueprints for good governance, and 3) formulate and disseminate corresponding frameworks to evaluate performance, which often lead to eye-catching league tables. The second legitimating strategy is to stress topics where it already has an established reputation, that is, 'good governance' and 'new public management', and to place special emphasis on these topics in the documents' executive summaries. The third strategy is to limit its referencing to a limited pool of external sources, most of which are from other IOs and consultancies that provide a simplified version of water governance that is devoid of political and ethical dilemmas. Fourth, the OECD references itself extensively, by both formal citations and frequent in-text references. The fifth and last legitimating strategy is to orchestrate temporary networks of actors to endorse its efforts and tools. Taken together, these strategies point to the strongly self-referential and in-group nature of the OECD's efforts to build its authority.

In the sense used in van Leeuwen's typology of forms of legitimation, all five of these strategies can be seen as forms of 'authorisation', that is, attempts to justify by reference to presumed sources of authority. The OECD produces studies, frameworks and tools that it subsequently uses to advance knowledge claims on how water should be managed; however, its manner of doing this has been significantly isolated from wider societal and academic debates and from the many controversies therein

(see, for example, Taylor et al., 2019). We thus call for more diverse and thorough bases for the knowledge claims found in the OECD's discourses.

The article proceeds as follows. We first discuss the OECD's rise as a putative authority on global water governance, especially through publications and networking. We particularly consider a corpus of 55 reports found in the *OECD Studies on Water* series that were published between 2009 and 2022. We then present our research approach, a purposeful combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques to investigate the OECD's soft power. The three ensuing sections present three types of analyses that explore the legitimating strategies. The first offers a Structured Topic Modelling (STM) exercise complemented by word frequency tests; this is used to analyse, first, the main texts of the reports and, second, executive summaries only. The second analysis presents quantitative and qualitative insights into 15 representative reports, two of which are analysed in greater depth. The third analysis illustrates how the OECD orchestrates temporary networks of allies; it does so by examining the composition of the signatories of the 2015 Daegu Multi-stakeholder Declaration on the OECD Principles on Water Governance, which endorsed the OECD's water governance work. We then integrate the findings of the analyses and situate them in the context of the larger body of literature on the OECD's methods of legitimation and on global water governance. We end by offering our conclusions.

THE RISE OF THE OECD IN GLOBAL WATER GOVERNANCE

The OECD in water governance: On Authorisation Strategy 1

The OECD was founded in 1961 and, as of 2024, had 38 member states. It is often characterised as a "club of mostly rich countries", as well as "a research and standards body" (*The Economist*, 2023) that influences many other countries. The OECD's policy judgments "can generate headlines" (ibid), and it "shapes the political discourse and policy agenda of so many countries by relying on its knowledge and policy norms of what works" (De Francesco and Radaelli, 2023a: 1). Commentators especially emphasise the influence of the OECD in sustaining the "hegemony of neoliberalism and a global capitalist economy" (Sellar and Lingard, 2013: 715; Pal, 2012, 2023). Remarkably, despite its immense soft power, it remained out of the spotlight on research on global governance for a lot longer than, say, the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank. Some years back, for example, Pal (2012: xx) argued that "the literature on the OECD as a whole is surprisingly meager" (see De Francesco and Radaelli, 2023b, on possible causes) and suggested that its work on governance and public management had been severely understudied.

The OECD succeeded the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation; the latter's mandate was to oversee the reconstruction of Europe after WWII, the administration of the Marshall Plan (1948-52), and the renovation of the European trade and payments system (1948-1958) (Woodward, 2009). It was later transformed into a knowledge institute; that is, it has subsequently had no aid funds to dispense but rather sets norms and standards for governance in areas as diverse as education, trade, climate change and responsible business conduct. It develops guidelines for public sector management and monitors their implementation globally (Sellar and Lingard, 2013; De Francesco and Radaelli, 2023b). It thus operates through methods of soft governance such as networking, peer review, norm generation, and benchmarking (Conzelmann, 2023; Kranke, 2023). Governments often like to place some sensitive matters outside the realm of domestic public debate (Hadjiisky, 2023) and then hope for legitimation domestically and internationally by being positively evaluated by the OECD. Various actors in the Netherlands, for example, repeatedly bring up a positive 2014 OECD assessment of the Dutch water sector, in order to brand and promote themselves internationally (Mukhtarov, 2022).

The OECD's soft power in the water sector has profound material and political effects and deserves close attention. In 2013, a year after the 6th World Water Forum (WWF) in France, it established the Water Governance Initiative (WGI), a community of practice comprised of over a hundred stakeholders.

Between 2013 and 2018, the WGI met every six months to discuss and advise the OECD Secretariat on its water sector work (OECD, 2015: 5). It was a site for development of the OECD Principles on Water Governance, which were presented during the 7th WWF held in 2015 in South Korea, for the OECD Water Governance Indicator Framework presented in 2018 at the 8th WWF in Brazil, and for the OECD Guide How to Assess Water Governance that was presented at the 9th WWF in Senegal in 2022 (OECD, 2022).

In addition to these policy forums, OECD-affiliated researchers published across a number of academic and policy venues; these included special issues of major academic journals such as *Water International*, *MDPI Water*, *Utilities Policy*, and the *International Journal of Water Resources Development* (see, for example, Akhmouch and Clavreul, 2016; Akhmouch et al., 2018, 2020; Akhmouch and Correia, 2016; Gurría, 2020; Romano and Akhmouch, 2019; Jiménez et al., 2020). They also produced policy memos, online articles and content, videos, podcasts, brochures and leaflets. The scale of the operation reflects substantial financial flows for reporting, research, dissemination and marketing. Already around the time of initiating the Water Governance Initiative, the OECD as a whole had an annual budget of EUR 320 million and employed some 2500 permanent researchers who produced over 250 publications, research studies and reports annually (Pal, 2012: xii).

In earlier decades, the OECD had occasionally written on water (see, for example, OECD, 1989); however, its authority on water governance was minor compared to well-established knowledge organisations such as the World Bank, UNDP, UNEP, UNESCO-IHP,[1] IHE-Delft,[2] or various other intergovernmental organisations (see, for example, Varady et al., 2022). In a recent book by Carroll and Kellow (2021) titled *The OECD: A Decade of Transformation, 2011-2021*, the authors describe how this changed from 2006 onwards. One of the top priorities of the new Secretary-General, Angel Gurría, they write, was to deal with water security:

> His third priority, water governance and economics, came as something of a surprise to OECD Ambassadors, for it was not at that time treated as a major issue at the Organisation. Gurría, however, had become acutely aware of its growing importance while a minister in Mexico, given the acute water shortages in the north of the country, and became increasingly involved in international work in the area (…). In 2006, shortly after his appointment as Secretary-General, he chaired the Water Financing Taskforce at the 4th World Water Forum, held in Mexico (Carroll and Kellow, 2021: 31).

Given the high priority that was now being assigned to water, combined with the lack of any prior track record in the field, it is understandable that the OECD sought to follow a familiar script to achieve results (cf. Hadjiisky, 2023). Using the three components of what we have called above its 'first strategy', it restated existing understandings in vague terms in order to declare a consensus on water governance principles (examples will be examined later), it formulated and disseminated blueprints for good water governance, and it formulated and disseminated corresponding frameworks to evaluate performance. The results were remarkable: it arose as a new major player in the global water arena, presenting an extensive toolkit that has become popular with many governments, funders and consultants interested in water governance. Citations of the articles published by the OECD team in the Google Scholar databases show attention to them in both professional and scientific circles, and publications coauthored by Aziza Akhmouch, the former head of the WGI, have gathered hundreds of citations. Recent academic work now frequently cites the OECD (see, for example, Woodhouse and Muller, 2017; Mirzaei et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2019). Professionally, a study of the use of the Water Governance Principles (OECD, 2018) reported that out of 170 stakeholder organisations that were surveyed, 80% actively used the Principles for facilitating multistakeholder dialogue. A Google search shows that the Principles and the practical guidelines for their application are available on the websites of major organisations such as the Global Water Partnership (GWP) and United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). Influential

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[1] UNESCO-IHP refers to UNESCO's International Hydrological Programme based in Paris, France.

[2] IHE-Delft refers to the Institute for Water Education, based in Delft, the Netherlands.

national-level programmes on water management, such as *Blue Deal* in the Netherlands (a collaborative effort of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Union of Dutch Water Authorities) have produced a manual for water governance assessment that is closely modelled on the OECD framework (Wilschut and van der Vliet, 2025).

The emergence of the OECD as a norm-setter in this area has had implications for narratives of water governance and has promoted new ways of financing through public-private mechanisms (Ahlers and Merme, 2016; Bayliss, 2013). According to Bayliss (2013: 297), for example,

> the OECD (…) calls for financial innovation to create "bankable" projects using innovative financial instruments which mainly involve public sector finance in a process known as "blending", combining grants with repayable financing; plus microfinance, output-based aid, guarantees and insurance; grouping financing vehicles; direct lending to sub-sovereigns; and raising equity. These mechanisms lean towards increased financialization with a stronger role for the financial sector and more complex financial instruments.

The following subsection details the programme through which the OECD managed to gain this influence.

The OECD Water Governance Programme (2009-)

The OECD research programme that generated the reports titled *OECD Studies on Water* produced 55 long policy reports, all of which were written in English. They were published between 2009 and June 2022, the cutoff date for our analysis. Two researchers from our team independently coded the dataset according to the following codes: *title*; *year*; *case study or conceptual*; *regional focus*; and *number of pages* per report. All the reports were substantial, with an average length of 153 pages; the longest report was 296 pages ("Water Governance in the Netherlands: Fit for the Future?"; OECD, 2014) and the shortest two reports were both 76 pages. Between two and seven reports were published every year, with a peak in activity (judging by the size and number of reports published) between 2013 and 2019 and a gradual decline after that. Figure 1 below shows the frequency and length of reports; to give a picture of the wider corpus, it also includes eight documents published between June 2022 and 16 December 2025. In May 2025, the website for the *OECD Studies on Water* was changed to include reports in languages other than English, bringing a total number of reports to 92 as of December, 2025; the total number of reports in English is 63. This paper reports on our analysis of the specified corpus of 55 English-language *OECD Studies on Water* that were published between 2009 and June 2022, which excludes the remaining 9 reports published after the cut-off date, including three reports published in the second half of 2022.

Of the 55 reports, 29 are global in their geographical focus; the remaining 26 represent South America (7), Eastern Europe (6), Central Asia (3), East Asia (2), European Union (2), West Asia (2), sub-Saharan Africa (2), Northern Africa (1), and Southeast Asia (1). Eastern Europe and Central Asia, taken together, form the largest regional category; it includes many non-member countries. The OECD's interest in impacting water governance and opening business opportunities beyond its member states is revealed by the fact that the coverage is largely of non-OECD countries.

In the 1990s, as noted by Pal (2012), the OECD expanded its operation into the former socialist bloc; it gained a major influence there with regard to the public sector reform agenda, especially in the field of public governance. Our corpus shows that this regional orientation is still noticeable; two of the recently reviewed countries, for example, are Estonia and Lithuania. Also notable is a relative absence of interest in Africa, in South and East Asia, and in Southeast Asia, possibly reflecting poorer market prospects there for water businesses from OECD countries.

Figure 1. Frequency and length of reports in *OECD Studies on Water*
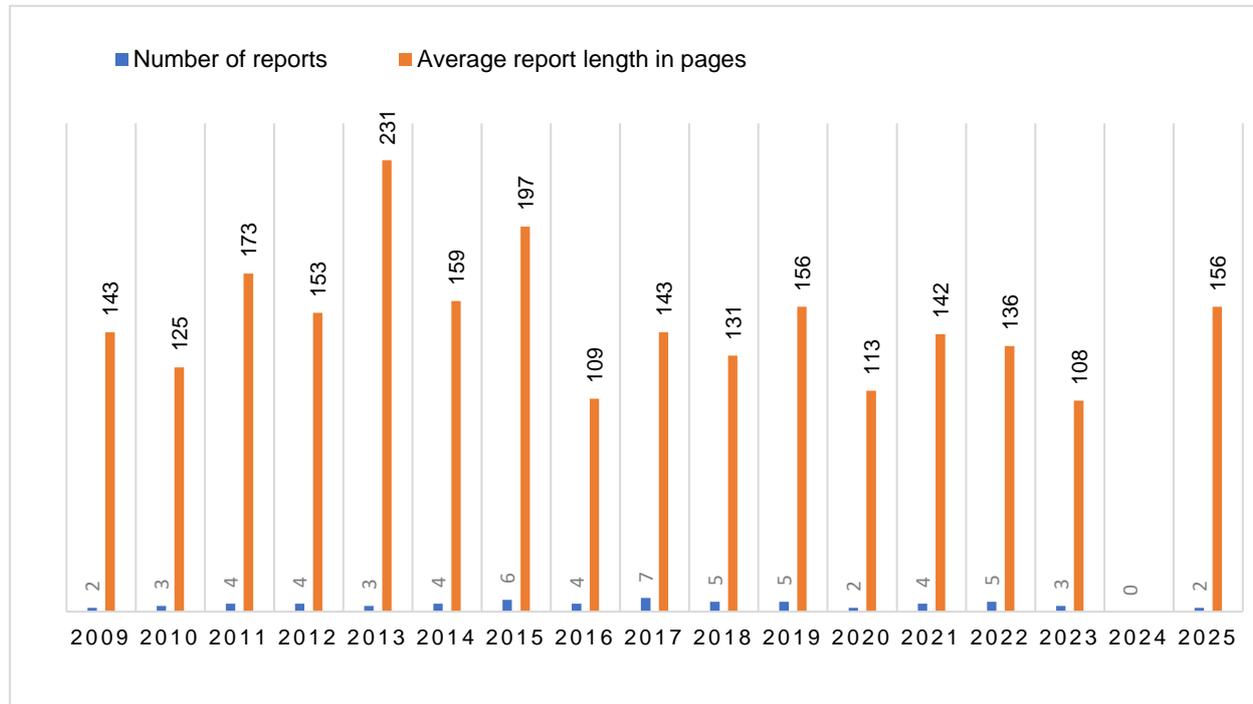
RESEARCH FRAME AND PROCEDURE

Previous studies on the normative power of IOs have demonstrated how the World Bank (Goldman, 2007), the Global Water Partnership (Allouche, 2016), and various UN initiatives (Varady et al., 2009, 2022) have formulated and imposed models of good water governance. These have sometimes been conceptualised by commentators as 'nirvana concepts', referring to their appealing but unattainable nature (Molle, 2008). By far the most influential multilateral actor in water governance in earlier decades was the World Bank (Goldman, 2007). To quote Seitzer et al. (2024: 844), "whereas [t]he World Bank supports the diffusion of its ideas with its lending power, (…) the OECD has to rely on the persuasiveness of its publications and data". The OECD, in other words, can only exert 'soft power'.

As discussed below, the OECD's methods of acquiring and exercising 'soft power' in water governance involve espousing "[an] overarching framework which sets objectives, guides the strategies for their achievement and monitors outcomes" for the water sector (Woodhouse and Muller, 2017: 226). While the OECD has acknowledged that "the large diversity of situations requires context-related responses adapted to local specificities" (ibid: 236), it has formulated and disseminated universal general principles for water governance. What we ask here is *how* it has claimed and established authority for these principles and their associated frameworks of evaluation and monitoring. Seitzer et al. (2024), writing on international knowledge brokering in education policy, compared the OECD's work in that sector with the highly decontextualised work of the World Bank that has sought global best-practice generalisations. As they put it, "By contrast, [in education policy] the OECD considers itself to be an intergovernmental organization… that facilitates policy learning and peer exchange among national policy experts to foster inter-country collaboration and peer learning" (ibid: 840). Our study examines the OECD's methods in the significantly different sector of water governance.

We proceeded as follows. We first organised the textual data into a corpus and defined and interpreted topics using Structured Topic Modelling (STM) (Roberts et al., 2013, 2014). As part of this exercise, we identified key themes based on the topics that could be clustered and further grouped. Clustering, grouping and interpretation happened in the discussion between three coders, who in the process came to an agreement on the procedure and outcomes. We used the results of STM to understand which topics were predominant in which reports, and we then picked 15 corresponding reports for closer investigation. These were the reports that emerged in the STM exercise as being those in which the major topics in the corpus were most prominent. To illustrate in-text citation and authorisation practices, we zoomed in further on the executive summaries of two reports.

We applied van Leeuwen's (2007, 2008) theory of legitimation strategies to investigate how the OECD represents itself as an authority in these reports. Van Leeuwen's 2007 paper is by far the most-cited article in the field of discursive legitimation (Yu and Zheng, 2023); by the end of 2022, it had 444 citations in Web of Science journals as recorded in the Social Sciences Citation Index. Its typology had already been presented and applied in detail in van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999). Van Leeuwen's position, following Weber, is that the "very system of authority attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy" (Weber, 1977, cited in van Leeuwen, 2008: 105). He further suggests that language is "the most important vehicle" (ibid) for pursuing legitimacy. Van Leeuwen identifies four major categories of legitimation:

1. *Authorization*, that is, legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law, and of persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested.

2. *Moral evaluation*, that is, legitimation by (often very oblique) reference to value systems.

3. *Rationalization*, that is, legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action, and to the knowledge [that] society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity.

4. *Mythopoesis*, that is, legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions (van Leeuwen, 2007: 92; see also van Leeuwen, 2008).

Note that, within authorisation, having 'institutional authority of some kind' also includes as variants the status of having acknowledged expertise (being acknowledged as an 'expert'), and the status of being a role model. Van Leeuwen's other three major categories of legitimation may also be relevant for considering how the OECD has made its case, but in this paper we focus on authorisation. We are especially interested in how the OECD has managed to present itself as an authority in water governance, moving from marginality to a prominent place in this field. Methods of authorisation that we consider include making formal references in a text to presumptively authoritative sources of information or data, and more informal referencing that invokes various actors and events, such as in orchestrated declarations of the type that we will examine later.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF TOPIC CHOICE AND VOCABULARY CHOICE – AUTHORISATION STRATEGY 2: OECD'S EMPHASIS ON DISCOURSES OF 'FINANCING' AND 'GOOD GOVERNANCE' OF WATER

In this section, we discuss two sets of analyses that we conducted using computer models. In the first set, we applied STM to the whole corpus in order to discern, interpret and analyse the major topics found in it. In the second set, we looked at word frequencies in two sub-corpora, including to see if there were important differences between the main texts of reports and their executive summaries. Executive summaries of large reports produced by IOs usually carry more weight than the main text, as they are meant to be read quickly by policymakers, executives, and staff of communications departments (cf. Fløttum et al., 2016). Seeing whether some topics are more prominent in executive summaries than

would be expected based on the full reports provides an indication of the desired priority impacts of the documents on decision-makers.

Structured Topic Modelling of the corpus

First, using the quantitative techniques of STM, we sought to identify the major topics discussed across the whole of the corpus. Topic Modelling (TM), in this study, was based on an unsupervised machine learning approach; this is an effective tool for examining semantic themes in large corpuses that are too extensive to manually code and analyse (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013). The computational model treats each document within a given corpus as a 'bag of words', ignoring the order of words in the text. It identifies sets of words that have a high probability of appearing within a single document; these are designated as 'topics'. Diagnostic criteria allow calibration of the model so that these topics have enough internal ('semantic') coherence and enough difference from other topics ('exclusivity') as measured by correlations of keywords across topics (see Figure 2). The number of topics identified can vary according to the choices of parameters, and researchers normally produce multiple models that are then compared with each other to pick a best-fitting model. We used the modification of classic topic modelling called Structural Topic Modelling, where associations are investigated between document metadata such as publication year and region and the prevalence of topics within each document. We do not report any variations, as it turns out, because we observed only very small and inconclusive associations between variations in metadata and the identifications of topic prevalence; however, the statistical analysis remains that from STM and we thus refer to our study as such.

Figure 2. A Structural Topic Model with 30 topics estimated from the corpus.
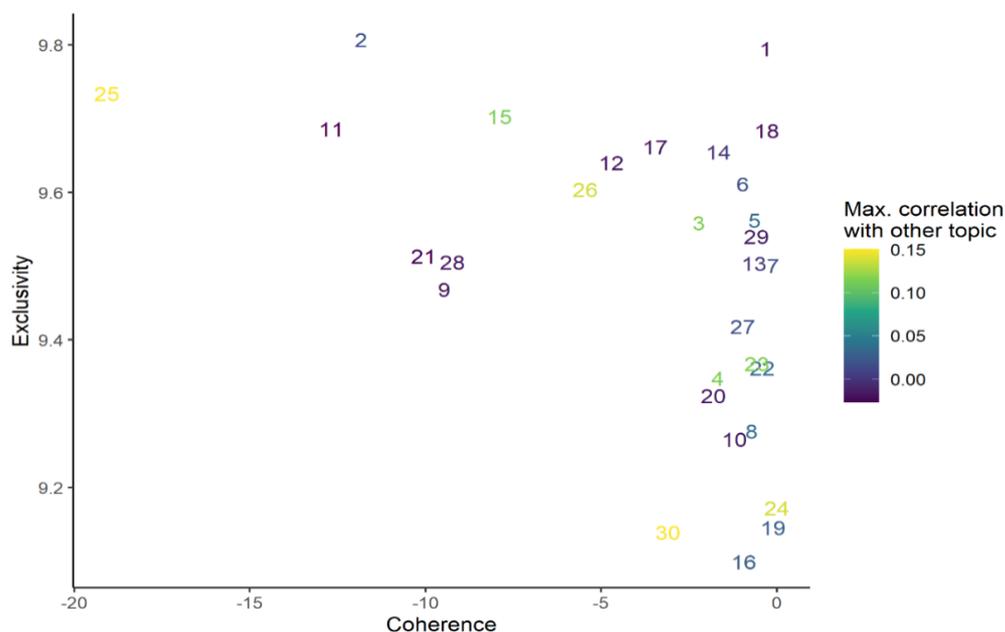
STM is unsupervised and thus is not biased by preconceptions about the text. Topic modelling does not replace expert judgment, however, but rather complements it (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013). Identification of topics does require human interpretation and clustering, which allows subjectivity (Grimmer et al., 2022). As Höhne et al. (2023) note, nevertheless, the results of TM provide a valuable general overview of the discourses and keywords in a corpus; they also indicate the spread of topics across the corpus and may suggest other directions for further research. It is thus a useful first step in exploring a large corpus, providing a basis for further analysis by, for example, critical discourse analysis (CDA) techniques.

We produced models with 114, 38, and 30 topics, respectively. Based on the diagnostic tools of exclusivity and semantic coherence, as shown in Figure 2 we present the model with 30 topics (STM-30), which had the best diagnostics.[3] Each point in the scatter plot above represents one topic. The x-axis shows semantic coherence, indicating how likely the most frequent words for each topic co-occur within the same document; the y-axis is for exclusivity, that is, how uniquely the most frequent words occur within a topic (see, for example, Airoldi and Bischof, 2016). The colour shows the maximum correlation of the topic's prevalence with another topic's prevalence. Topics identified in this model have a low correlation with other topics and coherence is relatively high. Figure 3 then presents this model with five keywords extracted per topic. The x-axis shows the prevalence of a topic, the y-axis shows the topics ranked according to frequency of occurrence in the corpus as a whole.

Three experts (including two of the present authors and a senior researcher, Professor J. Edelenbos) have labelled the topics from the model, independently from each other, and discussed to reach an agreement. The experts then discussed whether topics with slightly different labels could be merged. For example, the five top stemmed keywords that constitute topic 9 (pharmaceut, environment, environ, risk, vol), topic 14 (use, pollut, cost, manag, environment) and topic 20 (pollut, agricultur, qualiti, polici, sourc) are somewhat distinct, but can all be labelled as 'pollution'. We hence grouped them together in one cluster that we called 'water quality'. This type of grouping reduced the number of unique labels from 30 to 23, which further facilitated merging of the topics into eight clusters. Table 1 lists the finally agreed topic labels.

Figure 3. Topic prevalence (frequency) and top 5 keywords for the 30-topic STM.
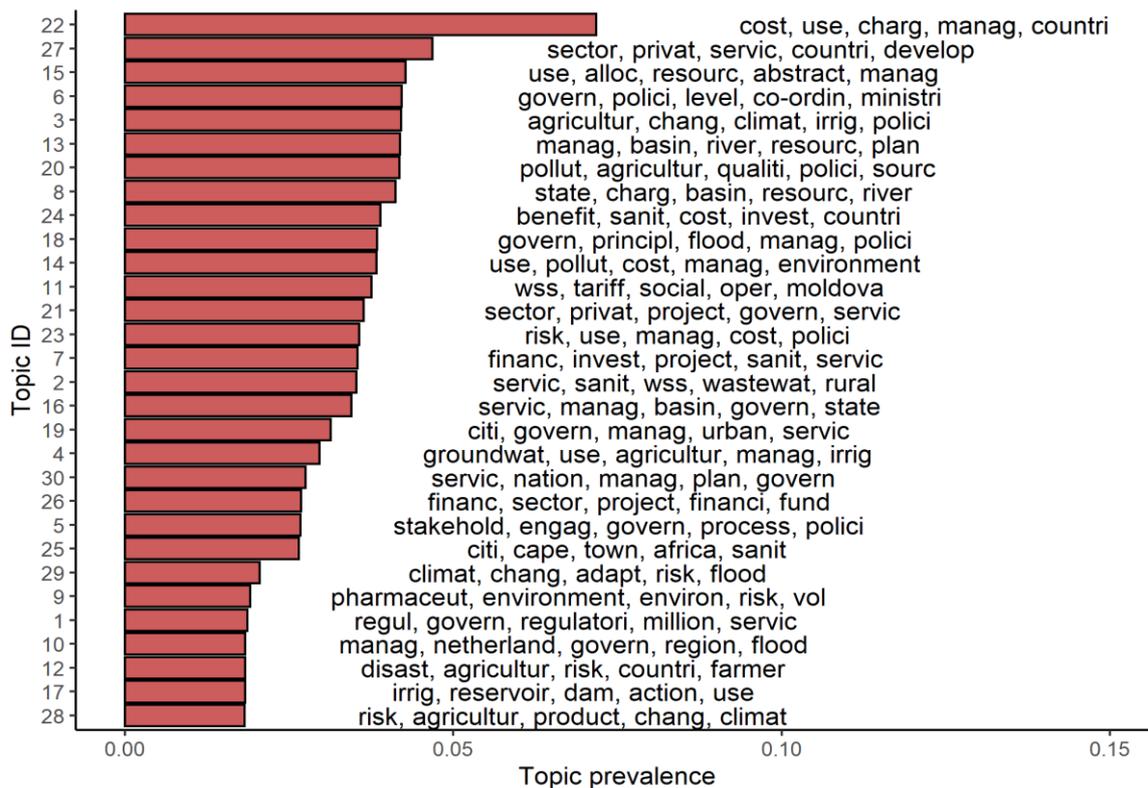
Finally, reflecting Grimmer and Stewart's (2013: 5) suggestion to "validate, validate, validate", we ran an STM exercise with a smaller number of topics to check if clustering 30 topics into eight categories (see Table 1) is supported by small-topic STM models. We compared those clusters with the results of the STMs with eight and nine topics. The clusters (based on STM-30) show great overlap with the topics based on STM-8 and STM-9; for example, only two clusters did not match with the STM-9 model topics – "Disaster Risk Management" and "The Netherlands". Table 3 presents the results of STM-9, the clusters based on STM-30, and the documents suggested by the model as most representative for each of the STM-9 topics.

Table 1. Topics, labels and clusters in the corpus of papers (n = 55) based on the *OECD Studies on Water*

Topic ID	Frequency rank	Agreed labels (30)	Unique labels (18)	Agreed clusters (8)
7	15	Financial Investment	Financial Investment	Financing and Economics of Water (6)
21	13	Public Private Partnership	Public Private Partnership	
27	2	Public Private Partnership		
26	21	Private Sector Financing	Private Sector Financing	
22	1	Economics of Water Management	Economics of Water Management	
24	9	Financing Sanitation	Financing Sanitation	
1	26	Regulation	Regulation	Water Supply and Sanitation (4)
2	16	Sanitation	Sanitation	
19	18	Urban Water Management	Urban Water Management	
11	12	Water Supply	Water Supply	
3	5	Climate Change in Agriculture	Climate Change in Agriculture	Agriculture (3)
4	19	Groundwater-fed Irrigation	Groundwater-fed Irrigation	
17	29	Water Storage for Agriculture	Water Storage for Agriculture	
5	22	Stakeholder engagement	Stakeholder engagement	Good Water Governance (8)
6	4	Multi-level Governance	Multi-level Governance	
30	20	Multi-level Governance		
8	8	River Basin Management	River Basin Management	
13	6	River Basin Management		
16	17	River Basin Management		
15	3	Water Allocation	Water Allocation	
25	23	Water in Africa	Water in Africa	
9	25	Pollution	Pollution	Water Quality (3)
14	11	Pollution		
20	7	Pollution		
10	27	The Netherlands	The Netherlands	The Netherlands (1)
12	28	Disaster Risk Management	Disaster Risk Management	Disaster Risk Management (3)
18	10	Flood Risk Management	Flood Risk Management	
23	14	Risk Management	Risk Management	
28	30	Food Security	Food Security	Climate Change (2)
29	24	Climate Adaptation	Climate Adaptation	

The two leading clusters of topics, 'financing and economics of water' and 'good water governance', represent almost half of all topics (14/30) and show where the priority of the OECD has lain in terms of topics for discussion (indeed, other topics might arguably have been included too in those clusters). We did include the two topics on 'Public-Private Partnership' (Topic IDs 21 and 27) in the cluster on financing because this categorisation aligns with the OECD's emphasis on hybrid funding models as mechanisms for attracting investment into the water industry (Bayliss, 2013). As the financial and governance clusters are the most prominent in the corpus, they will be the focus in the further quantitative and qualitative analyses presented below. We will also examine 15 selected reports through bibliographic analysis, and we will present a close reading of the executive summaries of two representative reports. Before that, however, we look further at the full set of 55 reports.

Word frequency analysis of the main texts and of the executive summaries of the reports

In the second leg of the quantitative analysis, we looked at word frequencies in the executive summaries of the 55 reports, as compared to in the full reports (without executive summaries). Before the comparison, we applied several preprocessing steps to remove irrelevant and nuisance words from the text; notably, we excluded stop words for nine languages (for example, 'and', 'or', and 'we' in English) and we also excluded the words "oecd" and "water" from the analysis. Finally, all remaining words were reduced to English word stems.

After the preprocessing, we calculated the frequency and proportion of every word in the main text and in the executive summaries (proportion = word frequency/total word count in text). Table 2 shows significant differences between the two sub-corpuses. While words pertaining to water governance

Table 2. Word frequencies in in executive summaries of the *OECD Studies on Water* corpus

Word frequency in main texts			Word frequency in executive summaries		
Rank	Word (stemmed)	Word frequency (times)	Rank	Word (stemmed)	Word frequency (times)
1	manag	13320	1	polici (including[4] policy)	716
2	use	11810	2	manag	504
3	polici	10740	3	countri	483
4	governance	8670	4	financ	452
5	resourc	8506	5	use	388
6	level	7990	6	servic	367
7	develop	7828	7	sector	346
8	servic	7766	8	cost	340
9	cost	7590	9	develop	338
10	risk	7329	10	resourc	328
11	agricultur	7072	11	level	327
12	countri	6749	12	need	318
13	sector	6290	13	invest	306
14	plan	6177	14	risk	301
15	provid	6149	15	agricultur	294
16	system	6036	16	sanit	281
17	nation	5974	17	governance	276
18	increas	5900	18	increas	257
19	basin	5830	19	improv	253
20	public	5821	20	econom	237

[4] The programme "R" was used for stemming and word count analysis. To our surprise, the stem "polici" included "policies".

appear frequently in both the executive summaries and the full reports, they are significantly more prominent in the executive summaries; further, and particularly striking, there is much more focus on financing and investment in the executive summaries than in the main reports, as judged by the average proportions of such words. Only two word stems pertaining to financial matters appear in the top 20 words of the corpus of the full reports ('cost' and 'risk'), whereas word stems such as 'financ' and 'invest' and 'econom' do not appear at all. In the corpus of executive summaries, however, the word stems 'financ' and 'invest' appear high on the list of the 20 most frequent words, along with other stems such as 'cost', 'risk' and 'econom'. The word stem 'financ' rises to rank four in the summaries.

To more vividly compare word proportions between the two corpuses (main texts and executive summaries), we plotted them against each other in a scatter plot. The plot shows the proportions of different words in the main text (x-axis) versus in the executive summaries (y-axis). Figure 4 shows the very substantial differences in relative word frequencies (that is, proportions) between executive summaries and the main text; executive summaries show a much-increased focus on finance and economics (with word stems such as 'finance', 'risk' and 'invest') and a more frequent use of governance terms with word stems such as 'polici' and 'manag', indicating that these themes receive special emphasis.

Figure 4. Comparison of word proportions in main texts and executive summaries of the *OECD Studies on Water* corpus.
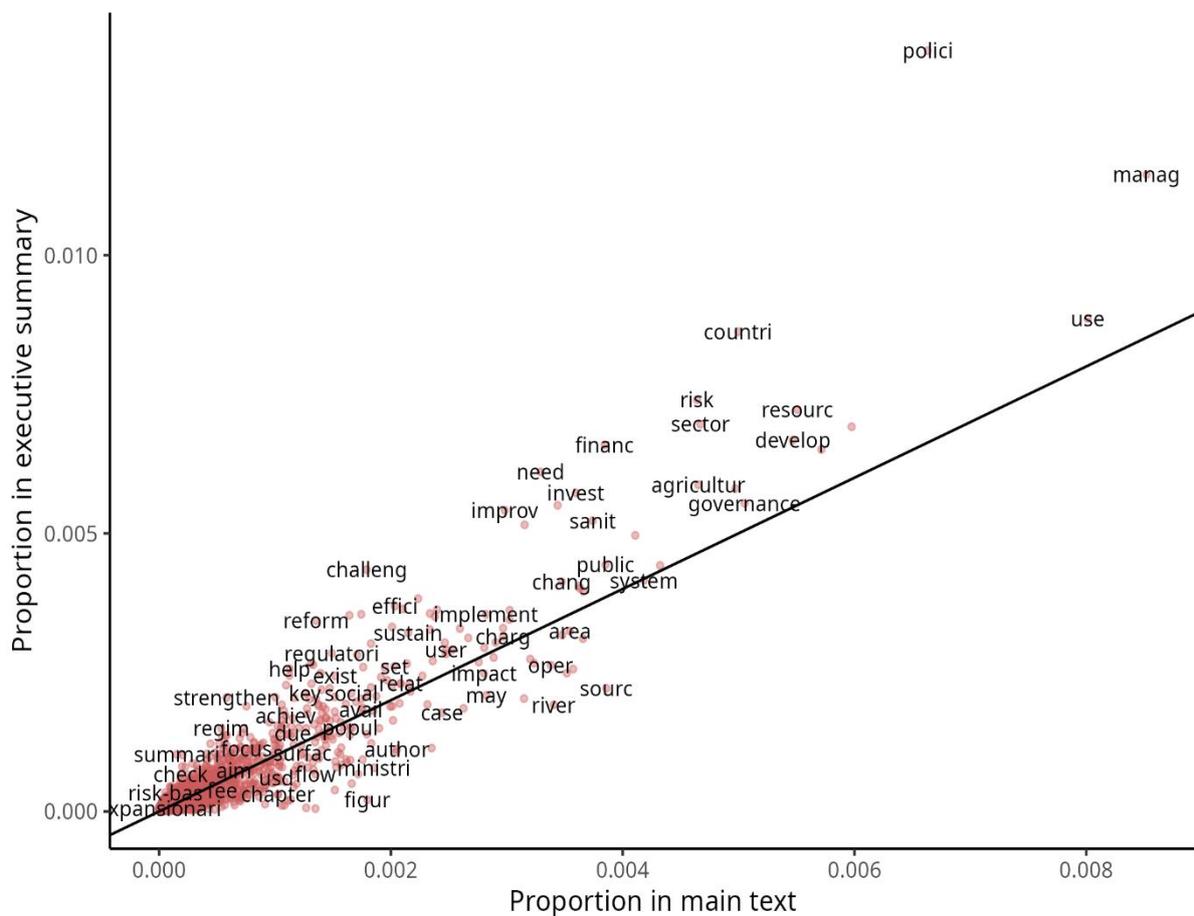
AUTHORISATION STRATEGIES 3 AND 4: RESTRICTED CITATION SOURCES AND EXTENSIVE SELF-REFERENCING

To examine further the legitimacy-seeking strategies of the OECD, we now consider how the OECD references others and itself as sources of authority in the texts. We first look at the reference lists of a sub-corpus of 15 documents and code the references according to type of source (for example, international organisation, government organisation, consultancy firm, academic study, or other). We then closely examine two reports to determine what sources are cited and how they are used in the text.

Patterns of citation

For each of the nine topics identified in STM-9, Table 3 lists the three documents where that topic is most represented. From these 27 documents we picked 15, three for each of the clusters classified as water governance or financing, and examined their patterns of citation (topics 1, 3, 5, 6 and 9).

Table 3. Identifying representative reports based on STM-9 model.

Topic prevalence (from most to least)	Topic label in STM-9	Matching clusters of labels from STM-30	Three key documents per topic (STM-9)
1	Finances and investment	Financing	• "Innovative Financing Mechanisms for the Water Sector" (OECD, 2010) • "Meeting the Challenges of Financing Water and Sanitation"[5] • "Making Blended Finance Work for Water and Sanitation"[6]
2	Water Supply and Sanitation (WSS)/Water Utilities	WSS	• "Sustainable Business Models for Water Supply and Sanitation in Small Towns in Kazakhstan"[7] • "Improving Domestic Financial Support Mechanisms in Moldova's Water and Sanitation Sector"[8] • "Reforming Economic Instruments for Water Resources Management in Kyrgyzstan"[9]
3	River Basin Management	Water Governance	• "Water Charges in Brazil: The Ways Forward"[10] • "Enhancing Water Use Efficiency in Korea: Policy Issues and Recommendations"[11] • "Water Resources Governance in Brazil"[12]
4	Climate Change Impacts	Climate Change	• "Climate Change, Water and Agriculture: Towards Resilient Systems"[13] • "Water Risk Hotspots for Agriculture"[14]

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[5] http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264120525-en.

[6] https://doi.org/10.1787/5efc8950-en.

[7] http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264249400-en

[8] http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264252202-en

[9] http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264249363-en

[10] https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264285712-en.

[11] https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/enhancing-water-use-efficiency-in-korea_9789264281707-en.html.

[12] http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264238121-en

[13] http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264209138-en

[14] https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264279551-en

5	Stakeholder Engagement	Water Governance	● "Mitigating Droughts and Floods in Agriculture: Policy Lessons and Approaches"[15] ● "Stakeholder Engagement for Inclusive Water Management"[16] ● "Implementing the OECD Principles on Water Governance: Indicator Framework and Evolving Practices" (OECD, 2018) ● "Applying the OECD Principles on Water Governance to Floods: A Checklist for Action"[17]
6	Public-Private Partnerships	Financing	● "The Governance of Water Regulators"[18] ● "Water Governance in Tunisia: Overcoming the Challenges to Private Sector Participation"[19] ● "Water Governance in Jordan: Overcoming the Challenges to Private Sector Participation"[20]
7	Pollution	Pollution	● "Pharmaceutical Residues in Freshwater: Hazards and Policy Responses"[21] ● "Water Quality and Agriculture: Meeting the Policy Challenge"[22] ● "Diffuse Pollution, Degraded Waters: Emerging Policy Solutions"[23]
8	Agriculture	Agriculture	● "Drying Wells, Rising Stakes: Towards Sustainable Agricultural Groundwater Use"[24] ● "Strengthening Shardara Multi-Purpose Water Infrastructure in Kazakhstan"[25] ● "Groundwater Allocation: Managing Growing Pressures on Quantity and Quality"[26]
9	Multi-Level Governance	Water Governance	● "Water Governance in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Multi-Level Approach"[27] ● "Water Governance in OECD Countries: A Multi-Level Approach" (OECD, 2011) ● "Making Water Reform Happen in Mexico"[28]

We found that the sub-corpus of 15 OECD documents referred to 965 different source documents. Of these, the largest source domain was IOs (n = 346, 36%), followed by government sources (n = 248, 26%). Together, these were almost three times as numerous as academic sources (n = 218, 23%), with the remaining 15% coming from NGOs, consultancy firms, network organisations, think tanks, media, corporations, foundations, professional associations, the public sector, and military organisations. Of the

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[15] http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264246744-en

[16] https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264231122-en

[17] https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/applying-the-oecd-principles-on-water-governance-to-floods_d5098392-en.html

[18] https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264231092-en

[19] http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264174337-en

[20] https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264213753-en

[21] https://doi.org/10.1787/c936f42d-en

[22] http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264168060-en

[23] http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264269064-en

[24] https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264238701-en

[25] https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264289628-en

[26] https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264281554-en

[27] https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264174542-en

[28] https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264187894-en

346 IO documents, more than half (n = 186, 54%) were produced by the OECD itself. A more detailed examination of the academic sources shows that of the 218 academic documents referred to, only just over half (n = 116, 53%) appeared in peer-reviewed journals. The other 47% included PhD theses, book chapters, monographs, as well as less-reliable sources such as poster presentations, talks at academic institutions, conference papers and working papers.

We then divided this sub-corpus of 15 documents into two: those documents that dealt with finance and/or governance at a global level (Group 1) and those that dealt with these topics on a country- or regional-specific level (Group 2). We found that at the global level the proportion of IO-produced documents among the total references increased to 55% and the percentage of documents produced by academia fell to 17%. We thus observe that the OECD cites IO sources far more often when discussing water policy in general terms and at a more global level than it does in country-specific documents; academia-sourced documents are cited correspondingly more often in country-specific documents. Most strikingly, we also found that academic sources are referred to relatively often in documents that deal with 'governance' (ranging from 21.4% to 41.6%), while those that deal with issues of finance have little engagement with academic literature (innovative finance: 5%; making blended finance work: 7%; meeting the challenge of financing water and sanitation: 6%). The OECD is pushing for the use of new financial mechanisms, including hedge funds, equity, PPPs, and blended finance; this gives rise to the question of whether the academic literature is less developed in this area or less supportive of these ideas. The answer to that question is beyond the scope of the current paper, but it is an issue to address in further work.

Closer examination of two representative documents

Selection of two representative documents

For closer qualitative investigation, we picked two documents from the *OECD Studies on Water* corpus. titled "Innovative Financing Mechanisms for the Water Sector" (OECD, 2010), and "Implementing the OECD Principles on Water Governance: Indicator Framework and Evolving Practices" (OECD, 2018); we discuss these in the next two subsections. These two major reports are representative of the two key themes identified earlier – respectively, 'finance and economics', and 'good water governance' – and they are not devoted to only a single country.

"Innovative Financing Mechanisms for the Water Sector*"* (referred to hereafter as IFM) (OECD, 2010) is 145 pages long, conceptual in nature and global in scope. It is one of the first studies by the OECD on the water sector, and the foreword thus includes a discussion of the OECD's previous involvement in water governance. The report was published in 2010 – still the height of the financial crisis – and hence the OECD defined its major aim to be finding ways in which "[scarce] public financing can be used in an optimal manner so as to leverage repayable finance from the market" (OECD, 2010: 4). It argued that "(v)arious forms of finance will need to be blended so as to achieve the optimal financing package that allows meeting key policy objectives such as increasing access" (ibid). The report was written by an international consultant based in London, with inputs from consultants in Paris, Washington, DC and Shanghai, and from two employees of the OECD office in Paris (ibid, 2010: 5). The report has a 12-page executive summary, which is unusually long for OECD reports. It also gives a long list of the people from international agencies who were consulted, while no participation from national governments is mentioned.

The second of the two documents was "Implementing the OECD Principles on Water Governance: Indicator Framework and Evolving Practices" (referred to hereafter as IPWG) (OECD, 2018), published three years after the Principles on Water Governance had been formulated and disseminated at the 2015 World Water Forum. The IPWG report is 150 pages long and, again, is conceptual in nature and global in scope. Its purpose was to present and disseminate a framework of 36 indicators to evaluate implementation of the Principles. It presents 52 vignettes on the water sector from various countries;

they are intended to show how the OECD Principles on Water Governance are well suited to evaluating and improving services. The report was written by employees of the OECD Secretariat, but dozens of names are mentioned in the acknowledgements as contributors and the preface is signed by 10 members of the WGI's steering committee, including from the Stockholm International Water Institute, Transparency International, International Office for Water, International Network of Basin Organisations, Spanish Association of Water Supply and Sanitation, Suez, Water Integrity Network, and the Scientific and Technical Association for Water and the Environment of France.

In both reports, we particularly examine how the OECD presented itself as an authority on water governance.

"Innovative Financing Mechanisms for the Water Sector" (2010)

We analyse here the formal list of references at the end of the 2010 IFM document. We also examine how the citations in the executive summary of the document were used. Overall, the IFM report listed 81 sources in its references section. Most of these originated from IOs (46%); this was followed by consultancies (26%), governments (16%), NGOs (5%), academia (5%), and media (3%). It is remarkable how dependent the claims of the OECD report were on IOs and consultants, constituting three-quarters of all references; it is also notable how little attention the report gave to governmental and (even less so) academic research. This finding is in line with that of other researchers, who stress that IOs, including the OECD, tend to predominantly cite other IOs (Zapp, 2021). The most-cited organisation here was the World Bank (15 publications); this was followed by the private company Global Water Intelligence (GWI) (9 publications), which works in support of the private water industry, and by the OECD itself (5 publications).

Besides the weight given to international organisations and consultants and the almost complete absence of academic research, a second feature demands attention: the substantial self-referencing that was evident. The OECD cited 5 of its own publications, making itself the third-most frequently cited organisation; furthermore, and remarkably, of the six documents cited in the executive summary, two-thirds (four) are by the OECD itself. The OECD thus gave its own publications proportionally far greater prominence in the executive summary. Let us examine the functions these citations played, by considering them within their immediate textual contexts.

The first self-reference in the IFM's executive summary reads as follows:

> OECD (2009a) *underlined* the importance of strategic financial planning to find the right mix of the 3Ts [financing of the water sector from tariffs, transfers and taxes] for achieving water and sanitation targets and leveraging repayable sources of finance. The present report examines in more detail how repayable finance can be mobilised, what innovations have been developed to increase such leveraging and how this is likely to be affected by the ongoing financial crisis at present and in the near future (OECD, 2010: 15; emphasis added).

The reference to OECD (2009a) in the above quote is to the publication titled "Managing Water for All: An OECD Perspective on Pricing and Financing", the 151-page report in which the OECD presented itself as a major knowledge repository and authority in water management. The excerpt above reports that the document *underlined* – it did not establish, prove or argue – the importance of "strategic financial planning to find the right mix of the 3Ts" and "leveraging repayable finance". The text does not offer evidence or reasons to support these ideas; instead, the choice of the reporting verb 'underlined' suggests that an agreement on the importance of the ideas predates the 2009 document it cites. The quote above thus has two functions; these are to establish, first, that this 2010 report builds in the direction highlighted by earlier OECD work, and, second, that the principles being put forward (including the 3Ts framework) had been articulated and established even earlier than that.

The second self-reference is the following:

> However financial innovation will not eliminate the need for reforms of the water sector. OECD (2009a) emphasized that "additional financial resources are a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for achieving internationally agreed, and other, water policy objectives". Other changes are needed alongside an increase in financing flows, such as improving governance, establishing the right regulatory and legal frameworks, promoting economic efficiency (including, but not exclusively, through tariff reforms) and support [sic] the development of local capacities. In developing countries, in particular, building ownership of the reform process by local stakeholders and overcoming the vested interests and opposition that often block reform are often preconditions for success (OECD, 2010: 22).

The excerpt above quotes from OECD (2009a) to the effect that more than "additional finances" are needed. As this is a routine and fairly banal claim, it is not clear why, in terms of content, this needed to be quoted rather than simply asserted, except in order to boost an impression of OECD authority. OECD (2009a) is also a report from long before the OECD had acquired prominence in this field; thus from the perspective of our research question, it is especially significant that the excerpt assumes and insinuates that this 2009 report is an authoritative text that deserves to be cited on matters dealing with international financing in the water sector.

The third instance of self-referencing is as follows:

> As noted in OECD (2009b), there are three basic sources of revenues for water and sanitation services: tariffs, taxation and transfers from Official Development Assistance (ODA) and other forms of solidarity. Taken together, these three sources (commonly referred to as the "3Ts") form the basis for achieving sustainable cost recovery (SCR). (OECD, 2010: 14).

Here, again, a commonplace and long-standing idea – the '3Ts' of financing from tariffs, transfers and taxes – is traced to an OECD publication (2009a, cited in the quoted passage above as 2009b) and not to the voluminous literature on water economics and governance. This is done in ways that reduce exposure; that is, instead of using strong terms such as "claimed", "demonstrated" or "proved", the OECD chooses the language of "underlined", "noted" and "emphasised". This promotion of solely the OECD (2009a) report illustrates how self-referentiality functions.

The fourth citation of an OECD document in the executive summary of OECD (2010) appears to function differently from those above:

> This report investigates how innovative financing mechanisms can help shift those perceptions in order to attract repayable finance so as to finance critical investments. It assumes that other reforms can be carried out in parallel, such as governance and tariff reforms, to ensure that strong revenue flows are generated so as to reduce risk and enable repayment of external finance over time. Other reports conducted under the OECD horizontal Programme on Water have addressed these required reforms, especially tariff reforms (OECD, 2009d), which is why these issues are not addressed in detail here (OECD, 2010: 13)

The text cited above as OECD (2009d)[29] is merely brandished; details of that report are not given, and instead we are simply told that it "addressed" the issues of tariffs and other reforms. One should note here how the intertextual reference nevertheless accomplishes a shift in the strength of commitment expressed towards the claim. In the first part of the excerpt, the text refers to an assumption "that other reforms can be carried out in parallel". Following the intertextual reference to OECD 2009d, these are no longer shown as possibilities but rather as "required" reforms. The pattern one sees here is that the OECD asserts an idea or coins a phrase, and then later cites its own publications in a way that invites readers to believe that these things are well-established or common knowledge.

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[29] We have used in-text and end-of-document references for OECD (2009d) because this is how the OECD referred to the document in the quote above. This explains why our reference list contains OECD (2009d) but no OECD (2009c).

"Implementing the OECD Principles on Water Governance: Indicator Framework and Evolving Practices" (2018)

There are 29 literature references in the 2018 document that we are referring to here as IPWG; this is many fewer than in the 2010 document that we have just discussed (IFM). IOs provide 76% (22) of these 29 references, of which the OECD is by far the greatest source (69%, or 20 references out of 29). Academics associated with the OECD form another 14% of the citations (4), and NGOs 10% (3). There are no references to other academic papers, governmental reports or consultancies. From the 2010 to the 2018 document, the reliance of the OECD on itself becomes far more striking, as does the absence in the later paper of consultancies as a major source of citations.

The executive summary in the IPWG paper does not provide formal references in brackets, unlike in the IFM document; we have thus looked at which actors, events, documents or organisations are mentioned as authorities in the IPWG text. In the two pages of the executive summary, 14 such entities are mentioned; 12 are OECD-related and these mentions are geared towards proposing and maintaining a central role for the OECD. Noteworthy also is the use of the term "principles" on six occasions to refer to the framework proposed in OECD (2015); use of this term thus also forms a self-reference. Let us consider some excerpts to illustrate the authority-building strategies being used.

In one excerpt, in an example of what we have called Strategy 1, the OECD suggests the necessary approach to sector reform: it pronounces a vague set of what are put forward as self-evident "principles" as if they are a special OECD distillation of wisdom that others must inevitably recognise and acknowledge.

> In 2015, the OECD Principles on Water Governance emphasised that policy responses to water challenges will only be viable if they are coherent and integrated; if stakeholders are properly engaged; if well-designed regulatory frameworks are in place; if there is adequate and accessible information; and if there is sufficient capacity, integrity and transparency (OECD, 2018: 17).

The only paper that is referenced in the 2018 document's executive summary is "OECD Principles on Water Governance" (OECD, 2015) (6 counts), as illustrated here. That 2015 OECD document itself refers back to the report titled "Water Governance in OECD Countries: A Multi-Level Approach" (OECD, 2011). That report, in turn, relies, among others, on the report "Managing Water for All: An OECD Perspective on Pricing and Financing" (OECD, 2009a) which, as we saw, was also the basis for many of the claims in the IFM document (OECD, 2010). Charbit and Michalun (2009) and Charbit (2011) are cited in OECD (2011) as sources for the OECD's list of "gaps" in water governance (presented as commonly found problems), that helped the OECD to present their "principles" as solutions to address the "gaps". Both Claire Charbit and Maria-Varinia Michalun have been associated with the OECD at least since 2007, and wrote the above-mentioned two reports with a focus on multi-level governance generally, and not specifically in the water sector. It is thus unclear why the supposed list of necessary policy elements, mentioned in the quote above, arose.

In reality, the wider literature on water governance does not offer a clear, tidy, fixed and universal answer on sufficient or necessary conditions for good water governance; determining what those conditions are, rather, is a very complex and evolving challenge (see, for example, Ingram, 2013; Molle et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2019). Indeed, critics have contested the OECD's claims that there is a global consensus on what constitutes 'good water governance' (for example, Heller et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2019). In a widely cited paper, Zwarteveen et al. (2017: 8) call explicitly for research work that is conducted away from established models and frameworks of water governance and towards "emphasizing the importance of also assessing the value of specific governance arrangements on their practical merits: how do they interfere with or modify distributions of water, voice and authority and expertise?". Where a set of principles, models and frameworks presents a tidy picture of what good water governance is and how to get there, critical water scholars have questioned them as being too devoid of

politics and contextual embeddedness (see, for example, Zwarteveen and Boelens, 2017; Zwarteveen, 2015). We see here authorisation strategy 1 in operation: assertion of legitimacy through frequent repetition of a particular interpretation as being established and consensual.

Another reference to the paper titled "OECD Principles on Water Governance" (OECD, 2015) reads as follows:

> Three years after the adoption of the Principles, this report takes stock on their use and provides an indicator framework and a set of evolving practices, building on lessons learnt from their implementation and application in different countries and contexts. These tools are the result of an extensive bottom-up and multi-stakeholder process within the OECD Water Governance Initiative (OECD 2018: 17).

Reporting-verbs such as "takes stock" and "provides an indicator framework" imply activities of reporting and bringing forward, not of influencing or creating. Legitimacy is claimed from the process being "participatory and bottom-up". In other words, rather than being a scientific summary, this reads more like a press statement, brochure or handout.

> A survey conducted across the 170 stakeholders having endorsed the Principles, gathered within the Global Coalition for Good Water Governance, shows that 80% of the respondents say that they have been using the Principles to facilitate multi-stakeholder dialogue, assess water governance performance, guide reform processes and practices, build capacities, and/or develop research (Chapter 1) (OECD, 2018: 17).

When this claim was made – just three years after the Principles on Water Governance had been issued – there could have been time for only a preliminary assessment. It was evidently considered important, though, to declare that the principles were in use and useful.

The final reference to the 2015 "OECD Principles on Water" document acknowledges such criticisms to some degree but does not query the indicator framework:

> In fact, while indicators can raise awareness and address information asymmetries as a step towards better water governance, there is no unique way to measure the complexity that the concept of water governance entails, or to capture the variety of water governance dimensions, and the diversity of political, historical, legal, administrative, geographic and economic circumstances (OECD, 2018: 18).

Two networks are mentioned as giving legitimacy to the OECD Principles – the Water Governance Initiative (WGI) set up by the OECD itself in 2013, and the Global Coalition for Good Water Governance (OECD, 2016), created by the OECD in the immediate aftermath of the 7th World Water Forum in Daegu, South Korea in 2015. The 2018 OECD report, that we have looked at here in detail, is based on the surveys conducted with members of the Global Coalition for Good Water Governance, which the OECD defined as a body "composed of more than 170 members from government, and public, private and non-governmental organisations" (OECD, 2018: 44). It is telling that the Internet link provided in the 2018 OECD report to the document about the coalition now leads to the page of the OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities where no mention is made of the coalition. Our brief search on the Internet in December 2025 also returned no results. This strengthens our argument that this network was called upon as a temporary support mechanism to legitimise the principles, which are by now well-established. The coalition has then been terminated.

We look next at the declaration from that forum, citing it as a central example of seeking to build authority by constructing partial networks that then present proposed consensus statements.

AUTHORISATION STRATEGY 5 – LEGITIMATION THROUGH ENDORSEMENT BY NETWORKS: ANALYSIS OF THE DAEGU MULTI-STAKEHOLDER DECLARATION SIGNATORIES

Throughout its existence, the OECD has created and curated various networks to promote its ideas and vision. As Pal (2012: 18) observed, "the OECD is a preeminent example of a 'networked' organisation at

the international level". Commentators on the OECD's work on education, healthcare, and regional governance stress the importance of its networks in the creation, dissemination, and reporting on the use of its policy ideas (see, for example, De Francesco and Radaelli, 2023b; Stone, 2023; Pal, 2023). This is also the case in water governance, which includes how we speak and think about water as well as how we manage it.

The Daegu Multi-Stakeholder Declaration on the OECD Principles on Water Governance (2015) launched the 2015 OECD Principles on Water Governance. The Declaration was published unofficially during the 7th World Water Forum in Daegu, Korea in April, 2015; it was then published officially in June of that year, after the Principles were endorsed by the Council of Ministers. The World Water Forum takes place every three years and is organised by the World Water Council, whose offices are in France. The Daegu Declaration has 65 signatories (OECD, 2015) and is a quasi-legal document that indicates policy commitments that, while not legally binding, are used for evaluation by relevant OECD bodies to encourage adoption and compliance (Pal, 2012: 134).

The Global Coalition for Good Water Governance was mentioned in the IPWG report and throughout the OECD reports published post-2015; it is cited in order to legitimise the "democratic", "inclusive" and "bottom-up" process of formulation of the indicator and target framework that was created to evaluate achievement of the 2015 Principles. The Coalition, set up in 2016, "aims to trigger collective action and guide public action from policymakers, the business sector, and society at large through the identification, collection and upscaling of innovative solutions" (Akhmouch et al., 2018: 11). Its more than 170 members are from governments and from public, private and non-governmental organisations. The Coalition formally endorsed the declared principles of good water governance in 2016, but does not seem to currently be active.

Figure 5. The host countries of signatories of the Daegu Multi-Stakeholder Declaration.
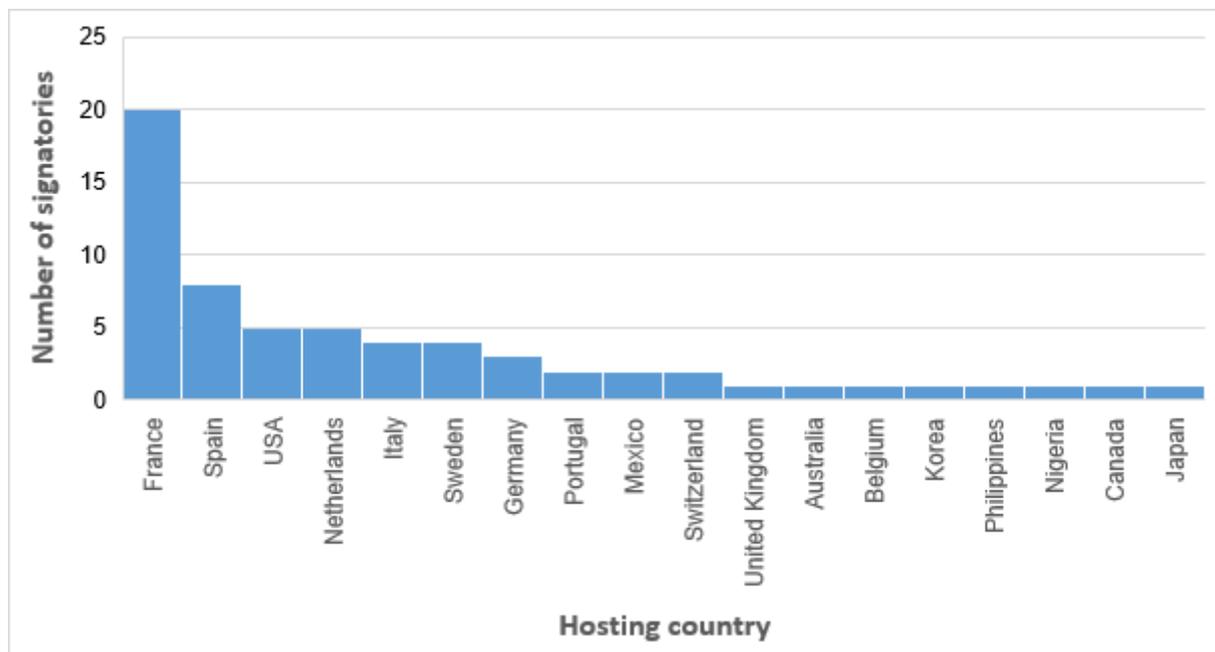
Source: OECD (2015).

Figure 5 shows the composition of the signatories of the Daegu Declaration. The countries are those where the headquarter of a signatory is located. The height of the blue bar (measured against the number scale on the y-axis) indicates how many signatories are headquartered in each country. The graph indicates that signatories are headquartered predominantly in OECD member countries, most particularly in France and Spain (28 out of 63 signatories).

These numbers illustrate the 'networked' nature of the OECD as an organisation that orchestrates various coalitions, networks and events in order to promote its agenda in a wide range of areas (Pal, 2012). The rapid mobilisation of signatories, especially ones based in France and Spain, and the creation of temporary coalitions such as the Global Coalition for Good Water Governance, suggest that the OECD was focused more on securing demonstrative support for its agenda than on fostering a truly inclusive and representative dialogue on water governance; this is despite its assertive and repetitive mention of the 'bottom-up' and 'inclusive' character of its efforts (see, among others, OECD, 2015, 2018). Indeed, a genuine global consensus on water governance would have been very difficult to achieve in just the few years that had passed since the publication of the framework.

DISCUSSION: OECD'S AUTHORISATION STRATEGIES

This paper addresses our key research question: what authorisation strategies has the OECD employed in water governance (including water finance). We have argued that the OECD has used five key strategies: 1) it reframes existing knowledge on policy, shapes new labels and acronyms, and subsequently proposes blueprints based on a declared consensus; 2) it focuses on a small number of topics as priority arguments – topics that reflect the established reputation of the OECD in other policy areas; 3) it extensively references other IOs and consultants for backing; 4) it references itself disproportionately; and 5) it constructs and maintains affiliations and networks in order to legitimise its policy frameworks.

Our reflection on these findings builds on recent research on the OECD's legitimacy-building in such fields as education, economics and trade (see, for example, De Francesco and Radaelli, 2023b; Li and Morris, 2022; Auld et al., 2022; Rautalin et al., 2021, 2023; Zapp, 2021; Browes and Verger, 2021). The paper also considers older and more general studies on the OECD's work in public management (for example, Pal, 2012). There is a striking similarity between how the OECD has worked in water governance and its earlier work on good public governance. In education policy, Sellar and Lingard (2013: 722-723) argue that there is a "self-perpetuating dynamic" by which the OECD "both prescribes education policy approaches and assesses the performance of national education systems in these [same] terms". This approach is key, they say, to the OECD establishing a "policy habitus" amongst policymakers and far beyond. This is illustrated by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) – an instrument that the OECD created and helped promote around the world (*The Economist*, 2023). The rise of PISA to a hegemonic status within education policy has created national reference models in education, including in countries such as in Finland; moreover, education is now viewed as a global competitive game (Sellar and Lingard, 2013).

This literature on the OECD is part of a wider body of literature on the organisational legitimation of IOs, including in the water sector (see, for example, Saleem et al., 2023). These studies investigate the strategies used by IOs to establish authority, the sources of their knowledge claims, and the use of science in such advocacy. Puy and Lankford (2024), for example, in this journal, discuss how the conclusions of the Global Commission on the Economics of Water may not be supported by rigorous science. Rautalin et al. (2021: 3), in another example, study the role of science in the OECD's legitimation of its policy advice; they find that the OECD's vocabulary has changed significantly since the 1960s, becoming less scientific and more representative of "popularized consulting language". They apply the epistemic governance framework put forward by Alasuutari (2015), which argued that authority can be built on

four grounds – ontological, moral, capacity-based, and charismatic. Rautalin et al. (2021) focused on ontological authority, that is, authority that an entity derives from its prestige as a source of what is presumed to be reliable, research-backed information; they investigated how the OECD acquired and maintains such legitimacy in the field of economic research.

Table 4. Legitimation strategies of the OECD in the water sector.

	Legitimation strategy	Examples from *OECD Studies on Water*	Research techniques used in this paper	Earlier studies on such strategies by international organisations (IOs), especially the OECD
1	Follow this script: 1) Reframe knowledge; 2) Declare a consensus; 3) Formulate and promote blueprints and standards; 4) Disseminate an evaluation framework	The OECD Principles on Water Governance and the '3Ts' framework for financing water; the OECD Evaluation Framework for Water Governance (2018)	Literature review; close reading of the 2010 and 2018 documents, authorisation analysis	De Francesco and Guaschino (2020); Browes and Verger (2021); Woodhouse and Muller (2017); Taylor et al. (2019)
2	Focus on topics where the OECD has experience, networks, and a reputation	'Good governance', 'public-private partnerships', and 'blended finance' are all drawn from the OECD's 'new public management' agenda	Structured Topic Modelling; vocabulary analysis; literature review; close reading of two reports	Zapp. (2021); Rautalin et al. (2021); Rautalin, (2023); De Francesco and Guaschino (2020)
3	Reference primarily IOs and consultants	Majority of references are to IOs and consultants; little reference to academic research	Bibliographic analysis; close reading	Rautalin et al. (2021); Saleem et al. (2023)
4	Self-reference	Extensive self-referencing in the two highlighted reports, both in the bibliography and in in-text citations	Bibliographic analysis; close reading	Saleem et al. (2023); Rautalin et al. (2021)
5	Construct temporary networks	OECD does this through working closely with established IOs and by creating its own networks, such as the Daegu Declaration and the Global Coalition for Water Governance	Bibliographic analysis; network analysis	Pal (2012); Zapp. (2021)

Li and Morris (2022), in turn, look at the legitimacy of the OECD in monitoring commitment to the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (Education for All). They use Suchman's (1995: 574) definition of organisational legitimacy as the "generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within a social system". In the case of SDG 4, they identify six of the OECD's legitimation strategies, which they list as: 1) building affiliations; 2) shaping and reframing SDG 4; 3) establishing credibility; 4) creating demand; 5) membership and belonging; and 6) persuasion in motion. For comparison, our findings for the water sector are summarised in Table 4 and are broadly in line with those for the education and other sectors. Below, we will reflect on the five strategies that we identified.

Follow this script: Reframe knowledge, manufacture consent, promote blueprints

The OECD has sought to collect knowledge on water governance in the broad sense and to propose and disseminate a consensus on what is needed for 'good governance' and sustainable funding. Such a consensus does not exist at all in the academic literature, but it does to some extent in consulting and policy advice 'grey' literature. The OECD's effort to declare a consensus in a contentious policy area has also been observed in education and, more generally, in its earlier work in healthcare, banking and public sector reform (Rautalin et al., 2021, 2023; Li and Morris, 2022).

The OECD gathers knowledge and subtly reframes it. It comes up with new labels for older concepts in order to put an OECD stamp on them, as in, for example, the '3Ts' framework for financing water – tariffs, taxes and transfers. The way it has presented its 12 Principles on Water Governance reflects another feature of its style: the principles are presented as neutral and objective and as based on an existing consensus. As Taylor et al., have put it, "the OECD Principles are presented as a neutral and flexible tool" (2019: 3), yet "these neutral terms describe systems that are shaped by politics, power and economic interests" (ibid: 2). The process of formulation of the Principles matched the agenda of concealing the political and power aspects of water management behind technocratic formulations such as 'best practice', 'efficiency', 'effectiveness', 'transparency', and 'accountability' (OECD, 2015).

The use of reporting verbs such as "underlined", "emphasized", "noted" and "reported", when referring to earlier OECD reports, reinforces this strategy of manufacturing a purported consensus; they put an OECD stamp on what is actually general knowledge in the field and give the impression that the OECD's previous studies are established knowledge. Phrases such as "as noted in 'Managing Water for All'" (OECD, 2009a), for example, act to position the OECD's earlier findings as accepted understandings.

Once the blueprint is formulated and presented as a widely agreed upon framework to a widely agreed upon problem, a manufactured consensus is disseminated. This 'consensus' is then reinforced through networking and through publication of an evaluation framework, as in the IPWG report (OECD, 2018). The more the framework is applied by various national governments, knowledge institutions, and donors, the more the OECD gathers authority in the field.

Prioritise topics where the OECD has pre-established authority

The STM analysis identified two dominant clusters of topics covered within the OECD corpus of water reports: 'financing and economics of water' and 'good water governance'. These clusters comprised almost half of the identified topics (14 out of 30, and some other topics could easily have been assigned here). Both these clusters reflect the OECD's 'new public management' (NPM) agenda.

The focus on financing reflects a broader OECD strategy that extends beyond water to other sectors, emphasising hybrid governance models and market-oriented solutions (Pal, 2012; De Francesco and Radaelli, 2023b; Zapp, 2021). From the IFM document (OECD, 2010) and more generally from commentaries on the OECD's efforts in this area (see, for example, Bayliss, 2013), one can conclude that the OECD follows the agenda of privatisation and financialisation of the water sector globally (Reis et al., 2024; Li and Morris, 2022; Taylor et al., 2019).

The second dominant cluster is 'good water governance'. The OECD has developed a formal set of twelve principles that frame its agenda for good water governance; these principles reinforce managerial and technocratic approaches to water issues and match a long-standing OECD strategy that can be seen in public sector reforms across other areas (Pal, 2012).

Reference other IOs and consultants, ignore academics

One striking aspect of the 15 representative reports that we examined is the paucity of academic, non-governmental, and even governmental references. In the pivotal 2010 report – one of the two that we considered in more detail – academia, NGOs and governments were either faintly represented or completely absent, and the 2018 report showed a similarly minor engagement with academia. The downplaying of these sources suggests that the OECD has preferred to construct its own narrative, minimising the influence of external voices and amplifying those of similar and like-minded organisations, that is, certain major consulting firms and IOs. By sidelining other studies, the OECD amplifies its own position as a repository of authoritative knowledge.

Saleem et al.'s (2023) study shows how research by IOs, including the OECD, has been relying increasingly on 'grey' literature such as reports of other IOs, consultants and think tanks, and decreasingly on academic research, a trend which we also found in our study. The relative rarity of academic references communicates something important about the OECD's self-perception and its intended audience. It also raises concerns about the rigour of the OECD's analysis, insofar as this analysis bypasses the rich anonymously peer-reviewed literature that could add depth and nuance to its reports.

Reference your own organisation and its products

Self-referencing is not unique to the OECD. Many IOs engage in similar tactics to reinforce their authority and establish continuity in their knowledge claims (see, for example, Saleem et al., 2023). Within the OECD's water governance documents, however, the extent and manner of self-referencing points to a special effort that it is making to position itself as the central source of expertise. In the OECD (2018) report on water governance, at least 22 of the 29 cited references are fully or substantially attributable to the OECD itself (15 are OECD publications, 2 are by OECD staff, and 5 are from a collection whose two first-named editors were OECD staff). In the executive summary of the same report, 13 out of 14 references are connected to OECD events, actors or artefacts. This suggests that the OECD is not just reporting on global water governance but is actively curating the narrative to position itself as a central authority in the field.

By constantly referring back to its own events and publications, the OECD crafts an image of institutional continuity, expertise and leadership. This strategy signals to readers – whether they are policymakers, researchers or other stakeholders – that the OECD is the key player in this domain and that it has the most credible and up-to-date information. Saleem et al. (2023) showed how IOs often cite themselves far more than what is the practice in peer-reviewed academic literature, where 20% is a norm for what is maximally acceptable (cf. Snyder and Bonzi, 1998). Saleem et al. (2023) found the OECD overall to be somewhat above this norm and observed that it was significantly exceeded by consulting firms and the World Bank. Here in the *OECD Studies on Water* corpus of reports that we examined, however, we see notable examples of even higher self-referencing.

Mobilise networks for support and dissemination

By promoting temporary networks and declarations (such as we analysed in the previous section), the OECD solidifies its position at the centre of international policymaking systems. This is part of a broader trend among IOs to build and sustain legitimacy by fostering alliances and leading short-term initiatives. The Daegu Declaration is not just a policy recommendation; it is a symbol of the OECD's centrality in orchestrating international consensus on water governance issues. The creation and maintenance of the

WGI is another example of how an international network is wielded to point to the OECD's central role in water governance architecture.

Crucial in the emergence of the OECD's effort to shape water governance discourses were four World Water Forums that took place between 2012 and 2022. Through those, water governance principles were conceived, presented and rolled out for worldwide application. These events are complemented by numerous workshops, seminars and webinars, as well as by a stream of publications, constituting a constant flow of information and networking opportunities that help keep stakeholders aligned with a particular view on water governance. One example of such initiatives is the "Regional and National Policy Dialogues on Water"; these are platforms that support countries in shaping and implementing water policies through 'evidence-based analysis' and multistakeholder engagement at national and region levels. In these dialogues, the OECD works with governments, local authorities and stakeholders to assess water governance frameworks, financing strategies, and policy coherence across sectors. The OECD's programme on water policy reforms in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA), for example, forms part of the GREEN Action Task Force; this is a platform for supporting governments in the region in aligning their policies and legislation with OECD ideas, work that has been ongoing since 2000 (OECD, 2025a). Another initiative is the Roundtable on Financing Water, established in 2017, a joint initiative of the OECD, the Government of the Netherlands, the World Water Council and the World Bank, providing a forum for engagement between the water and finance communities. The OECD has planned a 12th Roundtable in preparation for the 2026 UN Conference on Water (OECD, 2025b). The OECD's position as a central node in global water governance architecture then boosts its authority for making knowledge claims.

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE OECD'S STYLE OF DISCOURSE ON WATER GOVERNANCE

We conclude with considerations on how the OECD's style of discourse may be problematic. We precede this with a review of what the paper has achieved and what further work would be desirable.

In the paper, we first showed how the OECD has used five key strategies to legitimate its knowledge claims in the field of water governance, that is: 1) repackaging existing knowledge on policy, creating an illusion of consensus, and offering solutions; this is complemented by the dissemination of evaluation frameworks to monitor progress; 2) focusing on topics that reflect earlier OECD work where it had established a reputation; 3) extensively referencing other IOs and consultants while under-using academic literature; 4) referencing itself disproportionately; and 5) constructing and maintaining networks for endorsement and dissemination and using them to publicise the declared consensuses. These strategies produce a certain type of knowledge that is taken to be apolitical, is technocratic and universalistic, and is devoid of difficult context-specific and political debates. The OECD's modus operandi as an avowedly apolitical and data-driven advisory body is manifested in its language around governance and finance 'gaps', its twelve principles for water governance, its elaborate evaluation framework, and its reliance on earlier arguments in favour of neoliberalism (Hadjiisky, 2023).

Second, the paper demonstrates how combining mixed-methods critical discourse analysis (CDA) with an understanding of the OECD's organisational history and politics can reveal the organisation's legitimising strategies. Structured Topic Modelling (STM) identified recurring themes around good governance and public goods financing. STM then pointed to the fifteen reports that were most relevant for qualitative CDA. We examined their bibliographies to detect citation patterns and we then selected two reports for close analysis of their executive summaries, focusing on self-referencing practices. Two limitations of our work should be noted. The first of these lies in the limited validation of the STM models; while Grimmer and Stewart (2013) recommend expert panels to assess topic coherence as a measure of internal validity, our study relied solely on quantitative reliability measures (see Figure 2). The second limitation is the absence of interviews with, or observations of, OECD authors whose perspectives could have enriched our interpretation. We have countered these two limitations by triangulating our analysis

through the use of different types of tests and by positioning our findings within the larger literature on IOs and the OECD's politics of knowledge. Future research could include interviews with current or former OECD experts and consultants, alongside mixed-methods CDA. Further extensions might involve analysing additional documents, expanding comparisons with similar corpuses (for example, documents written by UN-Water or other organisations), and investigating related questions of motivation and impact.

Informed by the discussion of Antaki et al. (2002) on flawed argumentation, we can see the OECD's self-referential arguments as somewhat circular. The gist of the OECD's claim, as paraphrased by us, goes as follows – 'we have authority in this field because as you see we refer to many of our own earlier reports, and they in turn have authority because we refer to them' – a sign of "analogous circularity" (Antaki et al., 2002). OECD reports have commonly asserted positions by referring briefly, and without explanation or evidence, to past reports that were authored by the OECD or its associates. Frequent use of this technique results in an elaborate framework that is internally coherent but lacks adequate referencing and is based only weakly in an external reality that includes academic and societal debates. These tactics were seen above in Authorisation Strategies 3 and 4. The circular logic of the arguments makes them somewhat immune to criticism unless one starts tracing the sources of claims – an enterprise for which most practitioners lack the time.

Third, our findings provide grounds for making two explicit arguments: 1) the OECD needs to change its knowledge practices in order to better include the ongoing societal and academic debates on water governance; and 2) it needs to be more pluralistic in its sources of evidence and its topics of concern. By broadening the base for its claims, the OECD would also break out from a sterile, technocratic stance that does not do justice to the many thorny debates on how water is, and should be, managed.

The OECD's mandate is that of a knowledge and evaluation body. Preserving its legitimacy and authority in the longer term thus requires it to achieve an expanded and more inclusive basis for its knowledge claims. The users of the OECD's water governance advice deserve high-quality and pluralistic knowledge; the gold standard for this is academic peer-reviewed publications, but this standard is often not met. The OECD has managed to avoid scrutiny on this issue by associating with and referencing the research of other IOs with an established reputation in water governance, such as the World Bank. Its approach has worked so far, but the OECD can face questions in the future if the users of its advice begin to feel misled.

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