

Annual report 2025

Water and Waterscapes –

Children's Right to Clean Water



Summary for 2025:

This project aims to raise awareness of the need to cherish and protect water, water landscapes, and water sources, and to broaden understanding of water as a concept and a vital resource for children and their families across contexts, nations, and cultures. The annual report shows our achievements for 2025 and our outlines for 2026.

The project engages children aged 4 to 8 years and professionals to explore the conditions of their water supplies for washing and drinking, and to express what finding the sources and sensing the available water means to them. 12 national committees are involved.

Project leaders: Elin Eriksen Ødegaard & Aihua Hu

REPORT TO OMEP World annual year 2025 and plans from 2026 onward

Water and Waterscape: Children's Right to Clean Water

This OMEP World project has 12 National OMEP committees actively involved. The project is designed and implemented in collaboration with the KINDknow Research Center, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, and OMEP Norway.

Project leaders: Elin Eriksen Ødegaard and Aihua Hu.

Introduction

Water, the essence of life, is a universal necessity for survival. Its significance transcends health, human development, existential, spiritual, educational, and cultural boundaries. The way we interact with water, reflects practices, beliefs, and policy. The essence of water is also highlighted in The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 24 declares every child's right to health and access to clean drinking water. The project aligns with the UN 2030 agenda, especially through the following Sustainable Development Goals: Quality Education (4), Clean Water and Sanitation (6), Reducing Inequality (10), Sustainable Cities and Communities (11), Climate Action (13), Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (16) and Partnership for the Goals (17).

Target groups:

1. Children aged 0-8, and especially those aged 4-8, their teachers, families, and communities
2. Policy makers on local, national, regional, and global levels.

Overview of the background, rationale, and objectives of the project

Background:

The OMEP project 'Wash From The Start' has been oriented to educating and making adults and children aware of the importance of washing their hands frequently, as part of early childhood care and education (ECCE), and, as a tool to prevent the spread of multiple infectious diseases. Wash From the

Start was a result of a partnership project with UNICEF. The agreement was signed in 2016. Based on their initiative, Wash in Schools, OMEP was attending, especially in the ECCE from birth onwards. The program presented the value of access to drinking water as a human right. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of handwashing, but it also exposed the lack of access to drinking water in many countries, with harsh consequences for the most vulnerable groups, including early childhood.

In 2022, a new initiative was raised to the OMEP World Executive Committee. The aim was to revitalize the WASH From the Start Project. It was designed to uphold the aim of promoting healthy living conditions for children, while broadening the scope to include climate change education and education for sustainability more broadly, enriching education, and promoting children's voices and rights to clean water and quality education. It was agreed that a pilot study in this new direction could begin as a collaboration among OMEP World, OMEP Norway, and KINDknow Research Center, a center financed by the Norwegian Research Council with a profile in Early Childhood Education & Care for Sustainable Futures. The initiative was led by Professor Elin Eriksen Ødegaard and Associate Professor Aihua Hu, OMEP Norway.

Rationale

From a children's rights perspective, access to clean water and safe waterscapes (clean, safe water landscapes and waterways) is a matter of justice for survival and the foundation for a healthy body and all-around development. Uneven access to safe drinking water and sanitation produces inequalities that undermine children's health and long-term development. Ensuring children's entitlements—particularly the right to the highest attainable standard of health—requires more than technical solutions for access only: it requires attention to power relations, political decisions, urban and rural development, and inclusive processes that place children, their families, and early childhood education and schools at the center of planning and governance. Children's everyday relationships with local waterscapes—rivers, lakes, wetlands, coasts, and associated ecosystems—shape their sense of place, well-being, learning, and their development as sustainable citizens. Waterscapes are not only physical resources but also lived environments where children explore, make meaning, and develop practical and ethical understandings of the natural world. These embodied experiences foster public health, creativity, and engagement for living, place attachment, climate literacies, and foundations for future environmental stewardship.

Framing water as both a public health issue and an ecological and cultural commons highlights the hybrid nature of children's water knowledge: survival skills, scientific, geographical, and spiritual experience and knowledge. Recognizing this plurality supports more responsive, context-sensitive interventions that honor local meanings while addressing public health and environmental risks. Early sustained investments in children's health, holistic

education, and safe access to water and waterscapes yield compounding benefits across lifetimes and generations.

Therefore, this report argues for integrated action that:

- Prioritizes children's guaranteed right to clean water and sanitation in policy and practice;
- Protects and restores local waterscapes as essential spaces for children's learning, play, and cultural life;
- Involves children, families, and communities meaningfully in decisions about water governance and education;
- Aligns public health, environmental stewardship, and climate literacy efforts to reduce inequities and secure children's wellbeing now and for future generations.

By centering children's experiences and rights, we advance both social justice and resilient, sustainable relationships with water that benefit individuals, communities, and ecosystems.

Main objectives:

Impact global and local policy to prioritize cherishing and protecting water, landscapes, and sources in the best interest of every child and the planet.

Sub objectives:

- Broaden understanding of water as a concept and vital resource for early childhood education, children, families, and communities across contexts, nations, and cultures.
- Shift the narrative from viewing children as passive recipients of climate impacts to recognising them as active meaning makers, co-explorers of and belonging to their local waters and waterscapes.
- Enrich children's lives and their sense of care and belonging to their local

waterscapes, through local early childhood educational commitment

- Create narrative knowledge on the basis of children's views of what water means for them and their families in the places where they live.

With this initiative, we invited OMEP members worldwide to organize a collaborative exploration among children from birth to eight years and educators to explore the conditions for their water supplies for everyday lives, survival, and meaning-making

Summary of main activities, initiatives, and achievements during 2025

1. The project was formally accepted by the OMEP World Assembly (Bologna, July, 2025).

2. Wrote a project plan providing information on how to implement the project based on the summary of the pilot study in French, Spanish and English, which could be used by the National OMEP committees to promote their own local projects.

3. Published an article based on the data from the New Zealand part of the pilot study: White, E.J., Williams, N. & Martin, K. Worrying with Children and Water in ECEC: Exploring the Pedagogical framing Effects of Actions for Climate Change. IJEC 57, 133–156 (2025).

<https://doi-org.galanga.hvl.no/10.1007/s13158-024-00392-3>

4. Published a blog on the OMEP World website

5. Produced a project promotion flyer published in French, Spanish, and English

6. Produced a video of the Norwegian part of the pilot project (Magical images that can walk).

7. Presented the project at national (Norway and New Zealand) and international conferences (OMEP World, OMEP regional, EECERA)

8. Distributed an invitation for participation to all national OMEP committees

9. The following national committees accepted the invitation to participate in the main project, with the plan to be carried out during spring 2026:

Table 1: Participating National Committees and contact persons.

No.	Country	Contact person
1	Slovakia	Karla Klein
2	China	Li Zhang
3	Nigeria	Adefunke Ekine
4	Norway	Kari Anne Jørgensen-Vittersø Elin Eriksen Ødegaard
5	Turkey	Mehmet Mart
6	New Zealand	Parisa Tadi Jayne E. White
7	USA	Lea Ann Christenson Bradford Wiles
8	Cameroon	Alain Binyet
9	Australia	Amelia Ruscoe
10	Democratic Republic of Congo	Otto Michel
11	Sweden	Ingrid Engdahl Annet Hellman
12	Paraguay	Norma Rojas

10. Consulted Professor, UNESCO Chair and previous OMEP World president, Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson and Honouree OMEP member and previous project leader of Wash From the Start, Judith Wagner in relation to strengthening the project design and impact and planning for future impact.

11. Reanalysed and summarized the results of the pilot study in three countries (2022-2025). A short summary of the pilot study in Tanzania, New Zealand, and Norway follows:

Water plays a significant role in children's lives, but they are seldom invited to contribute their perspectives on its importance. Environmental learning has frequently been

framed around human-centered learning and the advantages it provides to humans, while this pilot report explored the significance of water and waterscapes, also considering children's relationships and entanglements with them. The pilot study aimed to explore and investigate children's meaning-making when they explore their local water sources and waterscape. The wider context and scope were to raise awareness of holistic (ECCE) for a shared, sustainable world for public and planetary health and wellbeing. Researchers from Aotearoa New Zealand, Norway, and Tanzania collaborated with 270 children and teachers in ECCE settings. Our dialogic and ecological conceptual framework brings children's meaning-making into dialogue with

political perspectives at the local, national, and global levels, as well as more-than-human geography, cultural narratives, myths, and spiritual stories. The pilot study captured how children explore and express 'water,' and how these engagements contribute to their early meaning-making and learning. The findings highlight the sociopolitical and sociocultural dimensions of water as children navigate its sources, uses, and meanings, thereby showcasing hope in climate change/sustainability education. The study also reveals tensions concerning the treatment of water inquiries in formal ECCE curricula, engagement with water, learning about water through scientific and cultural perspectives, embodying water's symbolic dimensions, and advocating for its preservation.

Plans from 2026 onward:

1. Send a revised version of an application to ERASMUS+ where OMEP Croatia is a partner, Water4Future.
2. Develop research proposals: Send proposed application for research; FLOWS: Step 2. OMEP World is one of 13 partners in Europe and Oceania.
3. A webinar to follow up on 12 participating local OMEP Committees in their implementation of the project (see local committees above).
4. Collecting short briefs of 12 national reports to start mapping and preliminary synthesizing for presentation use.
5. Remake and rebrand the WASH from the START booklets (developed between 2016 and 2022) as a springboard to a new and updated version to be published on OMEP's website. This will be a concise document highlighting the project's relevance and contribution to OMEP's global work, particularly in children's rights, environmental sustainability, and access to clean water.
6. Take new initiatives to the foundations and involve more collaborating partners.
7. Publish a research article based on the three pilot studies. Elin Eriksen Ødegaard, Aihua Hu, Nemes Danstan Benguye,

12. Proposed EU Grants related to the project:

a) Sent to HORIZON-CL2-2025-02-TWO-STAGE - Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society - 2025 First step sent and accepted: *FLOWS - Future-proofing Local communities by leveraging Water-related intangible cultural heritage for societal resilience*, a project attempt led by Geert Thyssen, KINDknow – Research Center, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences. This proposal builds on the results of the pilot studies.

b) Sent to ERASMUS +, *Water4Future*, led by Aihua Hu, KINDknow – Research Center, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, with OMEP Croatia as partner. This proposal also builds on the results of the pilot studies.

Ngaroma Williams, Veronica, Bergan, Laurent Gabriel Ndijuye, & E. Jayne White (accepted). Navigating the waterscapes: Children's expressions and perspectives of water across Aotearoa, Norway, and Tanzania. *Children's Geographies*.

8. Work on an article reporting the Norwegian pilot study
9. Publish a Podcast about the project
10. Develop resources for early childhood education, children, staff, and families.
11. Write a report summing up the results of the participating countries
12. Draft an article based on the results from the main study
13. Develop a policy brief based on the results
14. Present the results at national and international conferences
15. Encouraging the national committees to use the project as a leverage for local, national, regional, and international impact
16. Develop a visual storytelling based on the results
17. Develop educational open-access digital modules

Challenges

Obviously, the objective of this project is ambitious, and to succeed, it needs to be bolstered by collaboration among multiple partners: NGOs, policymakers, and influencers.

The challenges ahead are experiences on a local level for the committees, especially in Global South, to finance their engagement in the project.

These challenges are mitigated by continually sustaining the project through voluntary work and by integrating the development of education, research, innovation, and societal impact. We anticipate that the participants' continuous commitment to the project will make strong promises. We recommend that the project be further promoted to secure funding. One possibility could be to put extra effort into participating in projects in the Global South to meet UNICEF's target area.

Another mitigation strategy is to continue the efforts to secure funding for the project from prestigious funds.

Concluding remarks

The OMEP world project Water and Waterscape: Children's Right to Clean Water has already been recognized as important by 12 national committees, and we hope more will join us in the years to come. Publications, funding opportunities, and outreach resources for ECCE, children, families, and communities are underway. This project urges collaboration to drive global and local policy changes to prioritize the protection and stewardship of water and waterscapes for the well-being of every young child and the planet. We believe that children's voices, hearts, and hands across the globe are crucial in fostering a sense of belonging and kinship, by recognizing the critical importance of water and waterscapes for the equity and prosperity of all.

Bergen 13032026

Elin Eriksen Ødegaard & Aihua Hu

Sustainable Development Goals:



Quality Education

Clean Water and Sanitation

Reducing Inequality

Sustainable Cities and Communities

Climate Action

Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

Partnership for the Goals