

## Open letter

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### *Letter to the Brussels water operators*

#### Description

The platform Délier Les Fils de l'eau in Brussels aims to better understand the issues related to water management in the rue Gray (Graystreet) in Brussels. Individual attempts (by residents) to denounce important flooding issues have been vain for several years now, which is why the Platform took the initiative to write an open, co-produced letter to address the issue collectively.

At the start of 2023 (before the official launch of the Brussels' Fairville Lab), this letter was written and signed by platform members (professionals / researchers), as well as residents, and sent to the Brussels' water operators (Hydria, Vivaqua,...). This letter did not seek to accuse or engage in controversy but rather to describe and address the real difficulties faced by residents.

The letter starts by stating facts and is based on an investigation initiated by the platform among residents (+-15), revealing recurring and shared problems of flooding and damp in the houses, impacting even municipality building stock (about 20 buildings). This is extremely important, because with this survey –that can also be described as more traditional method– we are showing that there is indeed brown water and blue water flooding the cellars, whereas the public authorities were insisting that there was no rising groundwater. This is the central point of the letter, linking technical/scientific aspects with more political aspects.

Then the letter also presents more specific claims. The letter not only advocates for a public recognition of the problem which is not individual but structural - that's is very important -, but it also proposes concrete pathways for cooperation in understanding and diagnosing the flooding issue, using tools like FloodCitiSense (an app which allows collaborative tracking of the flooding patterns), as well as more structural solutions, such as technical studies which need to be initiated.

After one year of making the letter public, the issues related to flooding in the Graystreet are far from solved. Yet, we think this letter has been useful and a catalyst for our Fairville Lab in many ways:

- **Public visibility:** The letter allowed it to reach a wider audience than private communications. It allowed us to make our action known to more residents than before.
- **Community engagement & building coalitions:** The letter links diverse actors and residents in a collective. It enables us to pursue a common objective and work on common claims. We create a “united front”, even though we do not have all the same interests. But more it opens up the collective to a new world, that of public institutions. In this sense, it acquires the status of a ‘boundary object’.
- **Dialogue:** The letter enabled some first interactions with public services and gave more credibility to our action. It also provides constructive pathways for future actions which can inspire public actors.
- **Power, amplification of voices and accountability:** When multiple individuals or groups sign onto a letter, it amplifies their voices, which are powerless when only individual. The public nature of the letter can make it difficult to ignore and create a sense of accountability and put pressure on the addressed parties to respond or take action. It can be a first step towards bigger actions.
- **Documentation:** The open letter also serves as a formal record of the perspectives, concerns, and demands of the different parties involved. This can be important for historical purposes and can be referenced during future actions. It's a key element in the construction of our Fairville lab. In this sense, it is an “intermediary object” of the action research under construction.

In summary, the open letter can be a powerful advocacy tool by leveraging public visibility, encouraging engagement, creating accountability, and fostering collaboration among diverse groups of supporters.

**Tags/ keywords:** Method, Boundary and intermediary Object, community engagement, coalition building.

## Who can use this method/ be involved?

This is not a plug-in method. While the idea can be replicated elsewhere, who should be involved highly depends on the context and the issues at stake.

## Steps

- The importance of socio-technical co-investigation and validation. Without the survey of residents (and the local authority), we would not have been able to write this letter.
- The importance of solidarity between citizens and between disciplines.

Steps to create an open letter:

**1/ Identify the audience and a strategy:** Decide who you want to address with your letter and when. For us, this included public water operators, local authorities, as well as the general public. The letter was sent during the Brussels' water days.

**2/ Co-collecting data:** Gather information and document the issue. Look for material to support your arguments and provide evidence. E.g.: we supported our arguments with results of a survey.

**3/ Define the purpose:** What do we want to achieve with the letter? What are possible solutions we want to propose? A clear "call to action" should also be included. E.g.: we ask for a meeting with the water operators.

**4/ Co-redaction of the message:** After we all agree on the main message, the letter is drafted, reviewed and revised several times amongst the participants. Professionals in the group make sure that a constructive and clear proposal is drafted and that it is reviewed by diverse voices.

**5/ Distribution:** Decide on the most effective way to distribute the letter. You can send it via email, publish it on social media, submit it to local newspapers, or hand-deliver it to relevant stakeholders (this is what we did to make the act even more impactful).

## Resources and materials required

Having a good facilitator/ intermediary during the process can really help.

## Tips/ What to pay attention to

Inclusion of diverse voices during the writing process.



## Further reading/(re)sources

The letter can be found on EGEB website:

<https://www.egeb->

[sgwb.be/IMG/pdf/2023\\_02\\_20\\_lettre\\_rue\\_gray\\_courrier\\_vivaqua\\_hydria\\_signed.pdf](https://www.egeb-sgwb.be/IMG/pdf/2023_02_20_lettre_rue_gray_courrier_vivaqua_hydria_signed.pdf)

