

WEBINAR

MANAGING WATER SERVICES IN THE LIGHT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

On 7 May 2020, around 120 participants from 23 countries and representing a variety of institutions gathered in a virtual auditorium to discuss the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on water services. Those who had followed the invitation by IAWD and the World Bank enjoyed interesting insights and a lively discussion and are looking forward to the next edition on 14 May.

Moderator Raimund Mair, the World Bank's Program Leader for the Danube Water Program, introduced panelists Walter Kling, Elisabeta Poci and Gustavo Saltiel who subsequently reported on the crisis, its impact and various response strategies from both the international and regional perspectives.

Gustavo Saltiel, the World Bank's Global Lead for Water Supply and Sanitation presented international examples for the impact of the pandemic: Hygienic necessities like frequent handwashing trigger rising demand. Shutdowns will impact revenue collection and disrupt supply chains, leading to shortages of critical supplies. Margins for critical investments shrink.

In short, utilities in many regions of the world find that they are required to "do more with less".

Short-term crisis responses focus on continuity of services, financial support and expanding access to water, including off-network approaches where necessary. In the long run, says Saltiel, there may even be opportunity in the crisis, because it throws a glaring light on the social and economic costs of neglecting the water sector – and the value of the World Bank's Water Global Practice Tools and other improvement initiatives.

Walter Kling, Deputy Managing Director of Vienna Water and President of the IAWD provided insights into the crisis management of a large European urban utility. His team met the emergency quite well-prepared, with crisis response schemes in place and trainings for

numerous scenarios a regular feature of Vienna Water's team building programs. On a side note, though, Kling reveals that among dozens of possible emergency scenarios, his team had considered a pandemic quite unlikely. The upside of the situation is that in the current situation, Vienna Water is not on the front line of containment and mitigation efforts:

“Municipal authorities pretty much told us to keep the water running and to leave the rest to them.”

Accordingly, the organization's crisis response focused largely on staff protection, transferring as many activities as possible to home offices, shutting down buildings, providing the necessary security and now, with Austria enjoying the success of an early and thorough lockdown, reversing the process and returning to normal operations, including the current construction sites. Which includes, as Walter King notes, preparations for a possible second wave of infections and a subsequent second shutdown.

Elisabeta Poci, Deputy Executive Director of Albania's Water Supply and Sewerage Association contributed hard data about the situation in her market, because her organization had undertaken a survey among member utilities to measure the initial impact of COVID-19, and to review the crisis response of utilities. She reports that present and anticipated challenges regarding service continuity during the crisis include the impact of absenteeism on field and treatment operations for half the member utilities.

Supply chain disruptions causing shortages of treatment chemicals or personal protective equipment are not yet of concern, but widely anticipated to hit during the next months. Revenue generation and cash flow are a pressing concern for over 90%, with impacts on revenues estimated to reach up to 70% in the next 3 months, and up to 60% by the end of the year. Albania's utilities responded according to their crisis and continuity plans, introducing telework and social distancing policies and building reserves of trained staff to ensure continuous operations in spite of absenteeism. Poci finds the results of this survey quite encouraging, with the necessary protection measures for staff and customers in place and continuity of supply ensured. She shares Gustavo Saltiel's optimistic expectation that the crisis experience will build awareness for the importance of the sector and motivate future investments:

“Everybody seems to realize that these days, water is our best friend.”

The ensuing Q&A session had a strong focus on the revenue question, with the panelists in strong consensus that any solution is preferable to more or less protracted revenue cuts for utilities: “We would never consider reducing telecom or energy tariffs - so why water?” asked Elisabeta Poci. She recommends that utilities and associations use the crisis to educate customers and policymakers about the importance of water. Gustavo Saltiel agrees:

“We need to give a clear and powerful message that governments must not undermine the viability of the utilities and decisions regarding tariffs and collection will be of consequence.”

Walter Kling added a practical angle to the discussion, stating that if governments really want to help consumers, handing out cash is much less risky than messing with the quite complex electronic billing systems of utilities.

One completely different Q&A theme was the detection of Coronavirus residues in wastewater and the options to use those in the context of early warning systems. Walter Kling answered that Viennese sewage did indeed contain traces of SARS-CoV-2, yet not the virus itself, rather byproducts that indicate the earlier presence of the virus. Research in this respect was ongoing, but at the time without conclusive results.

In their final statements, all panelists called the crisis a challenge but also an opportunity for the sector to prove its importance, gain visibility, and emerge stronger. On this optimistic note Raimund Mair closed the first webinar and announced two more issues:

14 May 2020, 15:00 – 16:15: Exchange of experiences between water utilities in delivering services in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic

[Register now!](#)

28 May 2020, 15:00 – 16:15: Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic for ensuring business continuity of water services

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Further information, including the presentations and recording of the webinar, can be found on our [website!](#)