
THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX: NEW WAYS TO OVERCOME EMERGING CHALLENGES IN THE WATER SECTOR

World Bank Program Analyst Kathia Havens and World Bank Consultant Ana Badhofer chairing the session welcomed everyone to this special session format and gave introductions on the roundtable logistics. All participants found their discussion group and were then guided by moderators and note takers through three different topics: Utility Management in times of crises, Workforce and staff challenges and climate crisis mitigation.

Lively discussions outside the Box

After an hour of discussions, session chairs introduced a team of rapporteurs to wrap up the session with some insights from group discussions.

Gabor Kisvardai of the Hungarian Energy and Public Utility Regulatory Authority reported for his group from the regulatory perspective, noting during the recent crises, the water sector in Europe passed the exam although, regrettably, the majority of regulators could not react to the sudden energy price crisis as swiftly as necessary for lack of legal competences. Regarding the attractiveness of the water sector as a workplace, the regulators' data show that it is low. "We are not actually blaming utilities", comments Mr. Kisvardai: "Educational strategies, national water strategies and laws need to improve." The group agreed that flexible arrangements are very important to retain employees, and that bad management practices and an unsupportive company culture drives them away. Mr. Kisvardai notes: "I was quite surprised by the audience poll ranking salaries down at number four or five. Indeed, salaries in the sector are below the national averages in most European countries and I don't really want to compare to the energy sector, but they pay three or four times more." Regarding the most important adaptation measures to climate change, Gabor Kisvardai confesses that, "as regulators, tariffs are always on our minds." Beyond mere cost coverage, there needs to be an investment component in tariffs to finance non-revenue water reduction, renewable energy production and other necessary investments to adapt to climate change to reach the EU target of energy neutrality by 2040.

Young Water Professional Sofia Steinbacher, PhD student and researcher in Austria, delivered an emotional message from her discussion group: "Being a young person is challenging these days. We do not want to live as the last generation, and we would appreciate it if the older generations would engage and tell us that there is hope, there is a perspective, that we can solve these multiple crises to keep the world livable." It is also this kind of perspective that the group sees as main motivation for young professionals to join the water sector: "It is attractive to

work in a field, where what we do has an impact and real purpose. This is very important for the younger generation. But fair payment is necessary as well.”

Maja Medenica of Belgrade Waterworks and Sewerage and her team went through a long period without any young people joining because of an extended hiring moratorium. Now that it is lifted, nobody is interested in the vacant jobs: “Last year we advertised jobs for five engineers, and we were shocked that nobody applied. We must think how we can change this spiral. Our discussion group had some good ideas beyond salaries, which are set by the government. We should think about flexibility in the public sector work, about rotating our employees within the utility, and we should also engage retirees to continue to work for a few years and focus on employer branding and marketing to attract talent.”

Jelena Borosan from the Montenegro Utility Association brought a wide range of input from her group. To attract young people to the sector, they recommend cooperation, research projects with universities and schools, internships and also early education about the water sector. Introducing new technologies and digitalization might help to make utilities younger, more interesting workplace. Retention will need better salaries and fringe benefits, a healthy work/life balance, hybrid work models and incentives for good performance. Mentorships are also very important: “Give the young people responsibilities and the proper support in fulfilling them!”

Regarding climate change mitigation, the group states a list of the obvious, namely the adaptation of policies and planning, climate-resistant infrastructure, water storage, water reallocation in times of droughts, and non-water reduction. An interesting input is awareness raising by physical means like smart metering household consumption monitoring and setting limits like in Czech Republic.

Session chairs Ms. Havens and Ms. Badhofer thanked the participants for the lively discussions late in the afternoon and close the sessions with warm invitations to the conference dinner later that night.