

COMMUNICATION AND COOPERATION: JOINING FORCES FOR A WATER SECURE DANUBE REGION

The need to reach out to a wider public, to raise awareness for the importance and needs of the sector and to educate the public about water had been a recurrent theme throughout the conference. Now communication on all levels took the stage in the final session, chaired by Ms. Jelena Janevska, Program Director of NALAS, North Macedonia, and Mr. Jakub Sochor, Co-Chair of the Young Water Professionals Chapter in the Czech Republic.

The first presentation, titled “Strengthening Connections: Communication and Outreach for the Danube River Basin” was held by Helene Masliah-Gilkarov, Technical Expert at the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR). Ms. Masliah-Gilkarov walked the audience through the history, legal basis and organizational structure of the ICPDR, noting that here, a tiny secretariat serves the world’s most international river basin with 79 million inhabitants, connecting 14 contracting parties from nine EU member states and five non-member states, and striving to strike a healthy balance between economic development and environmental preservation. In this, the ICPDR relies strongly on public participation and transparency, being the only organization of its kind that employs a dedicated expert for this.

Aiming at a wide and diverse audience, the ICPDR has distilled its vision and mission into one clear and easily memorable message: “A Cleaner, Healthier and Safer Danube River Basin - not only for us, but for future generations, too.” The organization’s “magic recipe” to spread the message and create the highest possible impact is its “Public Participation Toolbox”.

Collaborations with 24 observer organisations from every field, managed by a dedicated Public Participation Expert Group, a broad spectrum of outreach activities, educational tools and flagship events like Danube Day, Danube Box and the art award Danube Art Master, on/offline publications, branding campaigns and social media activities aimed at the wide public, stakeholder consultations and inter-sectorial stakeholder workshops contribute to this impact.

“The ICPDR Newsroom works 24/7 - on and offline”, comments Ms. Masliah-Gilkarov, closing her presentation with a list of important takeaways: “Keep every dialogue solution-oriented. Bridge the information gap! Effective communication means presenting information in a language that is accessible to the broader public while maintaining scientific accuracy. Successful communication needs to present attainable accomplishments!”

A double take on raising awareness

The practical side of reaching out to the wider public was then brought to the stage by IAWD Program Officer Emilija Milunovic and Zvonko Naumoski, Capacity Development Advisor and M&E Officer of GIZ in North Macedonia. Each presented an exemplary awareness-raising campaign aiming to educate the public about water and sanitation services.

The awareness raising campaign presented by Ms. Milunovic has emerged from recent roundtable discussion of national water utility associations in the region. With support of RCDN the IAWD team hired a consultant to develop a communication strategy that reminds consumers how essential water is in everyday life. Aiming at young audiences, because they are open to environment-related messages and are generally the engine of change, this campaign uses short cartoon clips to carry a simple, very memorable message: “To make more of life – just add water.” The clips are designed for seeding in social media, are easily adaptable in multiple languages and are targeted at the Western Balkans region. They advertise a website that educates visitors about the need to protect and save water resources and to support the local utilities, providing practical “how to” to these themes. With a very limited kick-off budget, the campaign aims at a snowball effect, with stakeholders like utilities and associations joining in and helping to spread the message.

Concentrated on one country, North Macedonia, the campaign case presented by Mr. Naumoski has already produced a sizeable impact. It promotes the RCDN Wastewater Capacity Development Program in North Macedonia, where, as Mr. Naumoski reports, awareness for quality water supply and wastewater management is on the side-lines, local government units and public utility companies lack the necessary managerial and technical competencies, communication and coordination between institutions idle on all levels and weak water infrastructure planning and underfunding make the issues even more critical.

To kick off improvements, an awareness raising campaign targeted decision makers on all levels from government to the public. The campaign carried defined key messages in altogether nine videos, 30 social media posts, infographics for defined target groups, two website banners, two landing pages for the RCDN website, and two PR stories.

The impact was considerable. The digital presences registered seven million impressions in total, with 400.000 individual viewers reached, 428.000 views on YouTube, 153.000 social media engagements, 11.000 visits of the RCDN project landing page, and 7.500 reads of PR releases, and the phone numbers mentioned in the campaign running hot, as Jelena Janevska confirms from her own experience as one of the contacts mentioned.

Zvonko Naumoski ended his presentation with the following recipe for success: “You need distinctive visual assets. In our region, Facebook works best for broad reach. YouTube videos are a must. Infographics with local country data are eye openers.”

Wider campaign visibility and campaign continuity build up interest. Regional cooperation would enforce the awareness. A proper advertising budget is necessary”, closing with an invitation: “RCDN+ is ready to support you if the need and interest arises.”

From digital awareness raising campaigning the session moved on to classic PR, with Astrid Rompolt, Head of Public Relation, and Communication at Vienna Water reporting on the activities of Austria’s largest utility company.

Climate neutral since 1873: Vienna Water

Cornerstones of the Vienna Water's current PR activities are the much reported 150th anniversary of Vienna's public utility, the recently published "Wiener Wasser 2050" climate change mitigation strategy, information on electrical blackout risks, forced by an awareness campaign of the Austrian Army that triggered a flood of consumer questions, and information on current activities like the installation of drinking fountains and sprinklers everywhere in the city.

Proudly stating that Wiener Wasser is "Climate neutral since 1873", Ms. Rompolt's team uses all available means to carry campaign messages, from utility bills and construction sites to cars and water reservoirs.

The PR activities profit from the engaged participation of local government representatives including the mayor, who chairs a World Water Day press conference every year, and the responsible City Councillor who engages intensively in social media activities. The team also appreciates the ready availability of excellent photos and graphics in professional quality. With an average 15 press releases annually, Ms. Rompolt has generated 71 print media reports in 2022, and this year 42 print media reports by end of May. There is also a strong presence on TV, and a coordinated social media campaign on Facebook and Instagram.

Ms. Rompolt closed her presentation reminding the audience that the secret to success is keeping messages simple, creating charming and engaging social media posts, investing in quality photos and visuals is most helpful and that the media are always interested in preparations for the future: "Future themes are highly recommended!"

At this point, Ms. Janevska called for a quick audience poll, asking what it takes to create a great a public awareness campaign, and coming up with good targeting, strong messages and good visuals as the top three ingredients. The following short Q&A focused mostly on the social media platforms of choice, with Zvonko Naumoski recommending Facebook as the platform with the widest audience in the Western Balkans: "With Facebook and Youtube you are on the safe side there." Asked if the Vienna Water PR team has experiences with Instagram and TikTok, Ms. Rompolt answered that limited resources force a concentration on Facebook and Instagram: "TikTok needs a completely different approach and look, and we do not have the capacities for that at the moment."

The session then proceeded from communication with general audiences to member communication within associations. Milo Fiasconaro, Executive Director of Aqua Publica Europea presented "Communication with and for your members – the Example of Aqua Publica Europea".

Members only

Aqua Publica Europea, the European association of public water operators, counts 67 members and engages in networking, mutual learning and lobbying for public management. The organization takes an active part in numerous important EU-wide and international dialogues and runs its own communication initiatives, with the web-based Water Erasmus Toolbox ranking prominently among them: This knowledge platform offers Aqua Publica Europea members web instruments to facilitate the circulation of information on members' needs and expertise. With a search engine and an exchange tracker, the digital toolbox supports searches for solutions, experiences and knowledge within the network and promotes exchanges between members. The guiding principle in Aqua Publica Europea's efforts to engage members is to overcome a

huge diversity of languages, cultures, company sizes, functions, responsibilities and institutional setups with a customer-orientated, inclusive approach aiming at comprehensiveness, experimentation and adaptivity.

The last speaker to take the stage was World Bank Senior Water Supply and Sanitation Specialist Marco Antonio Aguero with a presentation on the next generation IBNET: “The new IBNET Partnership: Helping Utilities Take Action on their Performance”.

A Data Treasure Relunched

IBNET is a unique data resource with a long history, providing survey data from over 2000 utilities, collected over 20 years in 152 countries, and established as a popular tool used by development partners in planning and decision making. Yet, up to now few utilities have turned to IBNET to inform their decisions.

This motivated a comprehensive relaunch project that started with researching the actual needs of utilities and their staff and the subsequent creation of a new, human centric IBNET platform. The creators focused on providing an accessible and useable data service, building dashboards for easy-to-check insights and comparisons, cutting down the number of key performance indicators from 100 to 15, putting utilities in charge of self-directed data entry, and generally designing IBNET as an open social platform for the IBNET Community and Partnership.

Partnerships are at the center of IBNET’s services and operations: “We do not go around our partners, we go through them”, comments Mr. Aguero, mentioning the long-standing partnership with IAWD who the initiative’s first partner was. “We replicate what we are doing with you with others, and we appreciate your support”, Mr. Aguero said.

Much like the IAWD, Partner organizations promote the use of IBNET amongst their member utilities and/or counterpart utilities, host learning events that foster improved data culture amongst members and counterparts and contribute through insight and research, building communities of practice. Aware that it’s up to IBNET to earn its community and to earn its data, the team is already preparing the releases of improved versions 1.1 and 1.2 in 2023 and 2024, expanding the data services for Utilities, improving peer-to-peer learning support and releasing the platform in Spanish, French and Portuguese to improve accessibility.