

WEBINAR

UTILITY BENCHMARKING PROGRAM FOR THE DANUBE REGION UTILITIES

Using the now familiar online communication tools that have carried the IAWD members through the Corona lockdown safely, the IAWD hosted a webinar covering the experiences with, and the benefits of the Utility Benchmarking Program (UBP) offered under D-LeaP.

Philip Weller, Head of the IAWD's Technical Secretariat, hosted this event, which took place in the run-up to the International Utility Benchmarking for the Danube region online workshop on 17 June 2020.

Raimund Mair, the World Bank's Danube Water Program Leader, and IAWD President Walter Kling introduced the theme to an international audience of water service professionals and other sector stakeholders.

“As the pandemic situation continues, we get used to webinars. They allow us to continue learning from each other, which is also the purpose of the benchmarking program. The World Bank supports this program, because we believe that knowing and comparing your performance helps you to get better”,

Mr. Mair remarked.

“Once benchmarking is well established in your utility, and the staff is trained, you are ready to start working with indicators”,

added Mr. Kling, mentioning the OECD water service initiative which relies heavily on comparing performance indicators and taking benchmarking to the next stage, a future theme of the IAWD's efforts.

Next, Danube Hub coordinator Aleksandar Kristic took the stage and led the audience through the anatomy, processes and results of the D-LeaP Utility Benchmarking Program.

“Benchmarking is a tool for performance improvement through systematic search and adaptation of leading practices”,

he said, showing the web of national and regional hubs that carry the program and support data collection work in the local languages, and explaining the three-step process of assessing, evaluating and improving the performance of utility companies.

The practical side of benchmarking was subsequently treated by Ivan Ivanov, President of the Bulgarian Water Association, Nadire Vitija, UBP Hub coordinator for Kosovo & Albania, Evis Gebreja, Deputy General Director of the Tirana Water Supply and Sewerage Utility, Petar Pizurica, Plant Manager at Waterworks & Sewerage PUC Subotica, Teodor Popa, IWA Board member and Financial Manager of the Brasov Water Company in Romania, and Valeria Toth Godo, Benchmarking Coordinator of Szegedi Vizmü Zrt in Hungary.

Mr. Ivanov reported from the perspective of an association of 28 Bulgarian water operators and a Benchmarking Program participation since 2014. He found the program an overall success for the Bulgarian water sector, with increasing adaptations to the local circumstances adding to a very positive outlook.

Mrs. Vitija presented a side-by-side comparison of the situations of member utilities before and after the introduction of the Albania and Kosovo Benchmarking Hub in 2014, stressing the positive impact of benchmarking in their abilities to being effective, as in “doing the right things”, and being efficient, means doing things right.

Mrs. Gebreja's Tirana Utility is a longtime participant of the Benchmarking Program and appreciates it:

“This is a really helpful tool for improving performance and also creating transparency when dealing with consultants, regulators and other stakeholders.”

Petar Pizurica's PUC Subotica has benefited from IADW and Danube Water Program memberships since 2014:

“Benchmarking according to the D-LeaP methodology provides our company with reliable data and very informative comparisons with other companies of roughly similar customer bases.”

Mr. Popa contributed a short and quite entertaining presentation about his company's wide benchmarking experience, mentioning a mix of curiosity, the need for quality data and a context

as prerequisites for quality benchmarking, and a push by national authorities to enter the program, and stating that

“learning from the best helps us to achieve better performance. That’s why we work with IAWD.”

Valeria Thoth's Szeged utility operates close to the Serbian-Hungarian border. Joining the Benchmarking Program in accordance with national regulations, the management found benchmarking a very helpful approach that provides companies in search for profit increasing opportunities with a realistic view of their situation and development, and performance data sharing a valuable contribution to the ongoing cross-border cooperation.

With the scheduled end of the webinar drawing close, little time was left for answering questions, and the one that really called for a response was if the panelists had experienced serious obstacles when joining the Benchmarking Program. This brought up a quite lively exchange, with the consensus being that while the financial cost of taking part is negligible, especially when compared to the value of the possible improvements, the necessary staff power may be a factor. Regarding insights into company data the panelists agreed that while the availability of all data for all participants presents a major advantage, creating condensed performance reports for regulating authorities and the wider public might become necessary.

Philip Weller subsequently wrapped up the webinar content inviting utilities to join for their own benefit, governments to encourage utilities to join, and international financial institutions to do the same, because the program offers participant real advantages, and the best way to keep it going is taking part and contributing.

Further information including the recording of the webinar can be found [here](#).