

## WEBINAR

# LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC FOR ENSURING BUSINESS CONTINUITY OF WATER SERVICES

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The third webinar on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on water services and utilities took place on 28 May 2020. Once again, the invitation by IAWD and the World Bank this time together with NALAS drew a global audience, with almost 80 participants hailing from as far as Japan discussing the lessons learned in a global crisis.

**“These are extraordinary times, and now, while many are preparing to return to normal operations, is maybe the right time to reflect how we have been managing the crisis and how we should ensure business continuity and build more resiliency into systems to overcome future crises.”**

With these words, Moderator Kelmend Zajazi, Executive Director of NALAS, the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe, introduced a panel that presented a wide spectrum of perspectives: Lindita Atanasova, Technical Director of the water supply and sewerage utility of Skopje, represented the supply side. Bojana Kondić Panić, Chief of Cabinet of the Mayor of Laktashi, Bosnia and Herzegovina, told of experiences from the municipal point of view. Christian Plohberger, General Manager of Protectum Solutions contributed insights into the crisis management approach of professional security consultants.

Additional input came from the audience's answers to survey questions via Webex chat, a first in this Webinar format.

Christian Plohberger took the podium with a presentation on the basics of prepared crisis response in utility companies, touching all four phases from preparation during normal operations to immediate emergency response, subsequent crisis management and later recovery. He listed the technical contents of a solid pandemics preparedness plan, explained the anatomy of, and responsibility distribution in a crisis management team, noting that as long as such a crisis management structure is at hand, pretty much every crisis is manageable.

Also showing the basics of improvised "60 minutes to reach a decision" emergency crisis management, Mr. Plohberger noted that the current global pandemic presents quite an uncommon calamity:

**"This is a very long-running crisis, unlike landslides, contaminations and other common threats to water safety."**

He closed his presentation with a reference to the applicable European and ISO norms and also the [Water Safety and Crisis Management Program](#) offered under D-LeaP.

Next on the podium was Lindita Atanasova, Technical Director of the Water Supply and Sewerage Utility of Skopje, one of the North Macedonia's largest public-owned companies. She admitted that COVID-19 took her by surprise:

**"In the crisis management seminars I took, we discussed pretty much every disaster you can think of, but a pandemic? In the 21<sup>st</sup> century? No, we never imagined we would have to handle something like that."**

Nevertheless, a pandemic response plan was at hand, and Mrs. Atanasova's team hit the ground running: "Our company is an integral part of the Skopje crisis management, therefore we enjoyed a very high level of coordination and cooperation." Which was just as well, because the Skopje utility had to meet quickly fluctuating challenges: "In the beginning the situation changed very dynamically. We had to introduce response measures on a day-to-day basis to ensure continuation of the water supply for 600.000 inhabitants."

The first priority was to protect the staff against infection, with the spectrum of measures including distribution of masks, increased security and entry controls at company buildings, reduced staffing of laboratories and water treatment plants, home office wherever possible, and a staggered leave scheme ensuring that reserves would be at hand in case teams would have to go into quarantine. Another important part of the crisis response was communication:

**"Throughout the crisis we had to keep informing the public that drinking water was safe"**

says Mrs. Atanasova. That said, she notes that Water Supply and Sewerage Utility of Skopje has weathered the storm safely: "We were very successful in managing this crisis, keeping our services on the usual high level."

Last to take the stage was Bojana Kondić Panić, Chief of Cabinet of the Mayor of Laktashi. She added the perspective of a municipality of almost 40.000 inhabitants that struggled with predominantly financial crisis impacts, with increased water consumption from private households, reduced demand from private sector companies, and increasing operation costs adding up to serious challenges.

In the absence of a prepared pandemic response plan, many decisions had to be taken on the run, with a strong focus on hygienic measures, service continuity and continuing necessary infrastructure investments. Thanks to an intact cooperation between city and national government, and additional support by international organizations, the challenges were met, financial stability was secured and all monetary responsibilities were covered. Mrs. Panić said:

“Coordination is always important, and it is of special importance in times of crisis. It takes strong and committed local and national governments to keep going in a situation like this.”

During the initial statements, surveys ran in the background, with one of the questions covering the main challenges during the crisis. Here, employee safety was by far the most common answer, and reduced cash flow a not very close runner-up. Participants also had the chance to contribute questions to the panelists, with part two of the webinar dedicated to answering those.

Asked if utilities had done enough advance planning or if the crisis caught them off guard, Mr. Plohberger answered ambiguously, looking back at the considerable number of pandemic plans he has helped set up between 2002 and 2005:

“In many cases, pandemic preparation often wound up on the backburner, because this specific threat seemed minimal compared to other emergencies.”

He remembers one case where last summer a utility decided to replace a batch of expired protection masks and then wound up sharing the new masks with local health services when COVID-19 hit.

Another question touched the legal requirements regarding pandemic preparation, and here again, Mr. Plohberger answered ambiguously:

“Is there a legal requirement to have a plan? Yes – and no. Utilities in the EU are required to follow state of the art best practices, and a pandemic plan is of course part of any good Water Safety Plan, so the requirement, is as a matter of fact, indirect.”

One participant asked if the crisis experience might lead to an accelerated shift towards business process automation to reduce health risks to staff. Mrs. Atanasova confirmed that automation offers a recommendable path towards more safety for both employees and water supply.

Asked if special crisis plan suggestions were available for small utilities with limited staff resources, Mr. Plohberger showed a special small unit crisis management plan for organizations with under ten employees, with one person covering more than one field of assessment.

Concerning the lessons learned from the experience, Mrs. Panić said in her closing statement that the most important lesson from the pandemic was the crucial importance of advance planning and professional risk management. She added that the upside of the situation was an increased visibility of the utility companies, a growing interest in the safety of water supplies during an emergency, and therefore better prospects for future investments to address problems. Proof once again that chances can be found in even the most direct crisis.

**10 June 2020, 15:00 – 16:15:** COVID-19 Financial Impact Assessment Tool for water service providers

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