

2021 DANUBE WATER CONFERENCE: OPENING SESSION

With more than 200 registered participants gathering on a highly advanced conference platform, expectations ran high, and the 2021 Danube Water Conference met them from minute one, delivering food for thought in generous quantities.

Philip Weller, Head of the IAWD Technical Secretariat, and Raimund Mair, Senior Water Resources Management Specialist at the World Bank, moderated the kick-off event, welcoming everybody back after an unprecedented crisis experience. Raimund Mair cited a popular definition of resilience as “the ability to be happy and successful after something bad has happened”, and that is indeed what the 2021 Danube Water Conference is about.

A toast with clear water

Winston Yu, Practice Manager Water Practice ECA World Bank, started the welcoming round. He remarked that the Danube Water Program is the World Bank’s longest-running technical assistance program anywhere in the world, called the collaboration with IAWD a model for successful cooperation with a regional body, and expressed gratitude for what he called the “phantastic support” by the Austrian Ministry of Finance.

IAWD President Walter Kling toasted the audience with a glass of excellent Viennese drinking water, appreciating the 250+ event registrations, the state-of-the-art conferencing technology and the healthy growth of the Voice of the Danube community, yet expressing the sincere hope that next year will bring a much-needed physical get-together, the first since 2019.

Elisabeth Gruber, Director for International Financial Institutions at the Austrian Federal Ministry of Finance, reminded the audience of the importance of coordinated international and regional efforts towards resilience and water security in the face of widespread water stress, exacerbated by the ongoing climate change. Ms. Gruber took the occasion to announce that work on a Danube Water Program Phase 4 is underway.

The climate crisis – a water crisis

Next, Kala Vairavamoorthy, CEO of the International Water Association, took the stage, delivering a keynote filled with food for thought. “The climate crisis is a water crisis”, the IWA CEO states, noting that rising water risks share a sad top five position with weapons of mass destruction and natural disasters in the Global Risk Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on

Climate Change. In the same breath, he notes the striking dichotomy here: “Water is a top risk. So why is it not high up on the political and business agenda?”

Rethinking risks

Dr. Vairavamoorthy calls on political bodies to “reverse the sequence”, switching from post-disaster rescue and recovery to proactive prevention and cure, reminding leaders that “good water is good politics”. He sees a historic opportunity in the numerous “green” post-Covid recovery and rebuilding programs that are springing up in all corners of the planet: “Now is the time to capitalize on the movement and to reset water management in the context of new narratives”, he said.

“Historically, water has been a building block of the high carbon economy. Now it should become a building block for the new low carbon economy.”

A “golden age” for the wastewater sector

Regarding the best road to a water secure future, the IWA’s CEO states categorically that “wastewater is the key”, presenting examples for productive and creative steps towards a circular water economy using “designer water” of up to five different quality classes.

Dr. Vairavamoorthy sees a “golden age” ahead for wastewater and sanitation, especially for countries that need to invest now to catch up: “They can build on experience from big pilot studies!” The water future they build will be decentralized and therefore resilient, nature-based, and therefore decarbonized, and digital, and therefore feasible.

Readiness – or not?

There are stumbling blocks on the road to this golden age, though. Without readiness on the technical, societal, organizational and legal levels, change cannot happen: “We need to change the default setting for sustainable water management”, say Kala Vairavamoorthy.

“Up to now, we have been tinkering around, and that is not enough. We need a paradigm shift.”

Reacting to Dr. Vairavamoorthy’s keynote from the practical utility operator perspective, panelist Jiri Paul, Managing Director of VAK Beroun confirms that readiness is an important issue: “One of the biggest challenges, and one that most utilities in the region are facing, is changing the way our customers view water and its cost. We operate in a former Eastern Bloc country where, until three decades ago, water cost next to nothing. We really have to work with our customers, educate them, and make them understand that the price of a cubic meter of water includes expensive investments into safety and service continuity.”

Utilities leading the way

Panelist Monika Weber-Fahr, World Bank Senior Advisor, takes this train of thought even further, seeing utilities as potential agents of change and challenged to set regulatory agendas. Referring to last summer’s flood disasters in Europe, she notes that in technically highly advanced countries, authorities failed to communicate efficiently to prevent large-scale death and destruction:

“Utilities can play a role demanding change. Utilities will be listened to.”

Pointing to the “Utilities of the Future” Program, Ms. Weber-Fahr invites utilities to develop a culture of productive communication within the organization to build resilience and to work all the way up the ladder to produce readiness for the necessary change.

Changing the mindset

Kala Vairavamoorthy agrees that the water sector needs to educate society, not only about the value of water and the need for sustainability, but also about how to cope with disaster:

“We have created a society that believes infrastructure can protect everybody”,

he notes. “But we cannot build our way out of catastrophic events. We need to face the fact that our infrastructures are in fact quite fragile systems that, once they fail, fail badly. If, for whatever reason, the return frequency of catastrophic events overwhelms our reaction time, we are in trouble. This calls for a change in the mindset of both utilities and society.”