

ROUNDTABLE:

EXPLORE THE D-LEAP TOOLS FOR EFFICIENT WATER SERVICES

Mr. Philip Weller opened this round table session dedicated to two D-LeaP programs, the Asset Management program (AM) and Utility Benchmarking Program (UBP), stressing the importance of these programs for improving the efficiency and resilience of utilities.

Knowing your data and knowing your assets

In the session's first presentation, Katerina Schilling, IAWD, treated the vital importance of a solid database for every utility, together with the necessary structures to identify areas in need of improvement and those areas which work satisfactorily. Over the last decade, the Danube Water Program has created a working benchmarking strategy including the public performance indicator database DANUBIS.org, accessible on the Voice of the Danube website, support to national performance data collection activities and last but definitely not least the Utility Benchmarking Program (UBP).

Mrs. Schilling recommends that every utility should join the UBP: Organized in regional Hubs, it supports member utilities in assessing their performance, collects, validates and analyzes data in local language, holds workshops on performance improvement and issues helpful reports. Member utilities share their data and receive individual reports that help them to compare their own performance with that of other members in their national Hub and across the whole Danube region, offering a smart, efficient way to identify performance gaps. Hub members also profit from a lively exchange of knowledge, experiences and best practices. Ms. Schilling closed her elevator pitch inviting interested utilities to get in touch with the individual Hub coordinators for in-depth information about the program.

Next, Dr. Petros Kolovopoulos, Executive Director, Hydro-Comp Enterprises, Cyprus, treated the Asset Management Program, implemented 5 years ago in the region by GIZ, Hydrocomp and all D-LeaP Hubs. This program is hugely successful, offering capacity building and asset handling and maintenance knowledge for water and sanitation utilities. It meets a huge demand, because utilities are under considerable pressure to improve their performance and cost efficiency. Mr. Kolovopoulos explains that the objective of the program is to work through Hub centres to provide participating utilities with training, support and appropriate software tools to implement best asset management practices.

The program runs classroom training packages on three levels, Silver, Gold and Platinum, and teaches participants to set up and implement asset management tools, converting actual data for management purposes.

A path towards improvement

The following discussion format was moderated by Mr. Philip Weller, Head of Technical Secretariat, IAWD, Austria. Panelist Mr. Aleksander Sotic, UTVSI AM Hub, started the round recommending that utilities should grab the opportunity to be trained under the D-Leap umbrella and to achieve quick, effective improvements of their operations by joining the AM program. He calls participation a journey that can lead whole water companies towards proper decision-making cultures, with asset management being a starting point for managing change across a whole system. He also reminds the audience of the necessary requirements for successful participation in the program, namely an honest wish to improve performance, serious dedication, and a measure of trust.

Mr. Sokol Xhafa, Acting Director, Regional Water Company Pristina, Kosovo, then focused on the benefits of the both programs. He spoke from long experience, having joined the Kosovo Benchmarking Hub as early as 2014. Reporting is an important issue for every water utility, all the more in Kosovo, where utilities report to the regulatory authority, and Mr. Xhafa found benchmarking helpful in this respect and also in speedy, solid decision-making.

He counts participation in the Asset Management Program as one of the crucial projects of his company, only regretting that COVID-19 has delayed data gathering in the field and hoping that the necessary information will soon be available for future planning and projects stages. RWC Pristina has even hired additional staff to collect data, implementing the Benchmarking and Asset Management Programs not as projects, but as a routine daily basis process.

Mr. Darius Bor, Chief Financial Officer, Apaserv Satu Mare, Romania then stressed the advantages for utility managers once a database covers many years of development, showing how the business evolves and allowing comparisons with performance averages from the Danube Hub and also between divisions of a company.

He mentions that while it is valuable to participate in national programs, it is also very important to participate in international programs like the IAWD UBP, because this gives utilities a broader perspective of their performance. His own company benefited from such data, using them to prioritize measures to improve the performance in one year and four-year cycles, with the aim of becoming “a better company for our customers”.

Asked by moderator Philip Weller about the additional benefits of international level data comparison, Mr. Aleksander Krstic, Coordinator of the UBP Danube Hub, confirmed the importance of participating in an international benchmarking program, appreciating the benchmarking reports that compare the performance of an individual utility with others across the region.

Dr. David Tyler, Water Sector Specialist European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, UK, next described the activities of the EBRD in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkan, where the Bank invests in projects while also supporting reform efforts in the institutions they are working with, including the necessary capacity building. The EBRD is particularly keen to encourage sustainable financing and structures in every sector that they cover, and therefore appreciates initiatives like the D-Leap programs. Dr. Tyler explains that investment alone is not sufficient without providing utilities with the tools to create and manage their assets. The D-LeaP

AM program is a very powerful tool in this respect, and all the more important because the return on investments in quality asset management techniques is a lifecycle cost reduction in the vicinity of 30%, explaining why investment in assets does not make sense without also investing in asset care.