

## ASK ME ANYTHING: **EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WATER**

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Gustavo Saltiel has more than 30 years of experience in the water and sustainable development sectors. After serving, among other positions, as General Manager of Aguas Bonaerenses, a state-owned water utility serving 2.5 million inhabitants in the Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina, Gustavo joined the World Bank in 2003 as Senior Water Engineer in the Latin America Region. He then was appointed Sector Leader for Sustainable Development in Mexico and, more recently, Program Manager in the Africa Region, leading the Nile Basin and Cooperation in International Waters programs, as well as the Water Program in Kenya and the “mega” Rural Sanitation Program for Results in Egypt. We greatly appreciate that he found the time to sit down for a uniquely informal Q&A with Elisabeta Poci, Executive Director of SHUKALB, and the audience.

Looking back on his impressive career, Gustavo Saltiel remembers that as a civil engineering student he chose a specialization in environmental and sanitary engineering because here, many Latin American countries were lagging behind, and the opportunities to contribute were huge.

Saltiel started his career in rural Argentina, later switching to urban issues, and found being on a mission to improve the lives of communities immensely rewarding.

### Three fulfilling decades

Later on, as a manager of a big state-owned water company he had to balance political pressure, public demands and a unionized staff: “It was a fantastic job, but at the same time complicated. A politician wants to cut the ribbon at a new plant that has no water connection yet, and you have to improvise something while at the same time a quarter of the city runs out of water because of maintenance. And while you try to solve that a Union representative enters your office without knocking, asking what keeps you from paying the promised salary raise. But there were the good days when you could concentrate on serving your community, and that’s so uniquely fulfilling that you can afford a bad day with the union.”

## A laboratory for change

Gustavo Saltiel views the Danube region as something like a laboratory for change:

“The Danube water program is actually a microcosmos of what we are trying to do everywhere in the world.”

This includes capacity-building efforts, and Mr. Saltiel mentions that, according to a recent OECD survey, lack of staff affects 67% of all utilities.

“I think the national water associations should put emphasis on investing in people like you invest in infrastructure.”

He also feels that motivation and a positive image is at least as important as financial compensation: “Water utilities in many countries suffer from “Old State Syndrome” - antiquated, old fashioned, not attractive for young people. You need to give a sense of mission. Here, the water sector in many countries failed to communicate strategically. Society only hears about utilities when there is a problem.”

## A revolution underway

Mr. Saltiel thinks that this is about to change: “The aftermath of the Covid crisis gives us a tremendous opportunity. It has shown the importance of water for crisis handling and recovery. Water security will be extremely important in building resilient, green societies. We have a fantastic opportunity to rethink the water sector.” An important driver of this change will be digitalization, says Gustavo Saltiel:

“Smart utilities are indeed a revolution with impact on the whole business. Digitalized governments and regulators can monitor data real-time. Regulators can decide in much shorter intervals and smarter. Digital will change the way utilities are regulated. In short: We are facing changes and chances we have not seen in 100 years.”