

WRAPPING IT ALL UP: **THE 2021 DANUBE WATER CONFERENCE CLOSING SESSION**

The closing session of the 2021 Danube Water Conference brought a comprehensive sum-up, words of warning and encouragement – and a very emotional party-crashing video.

Toasting with a glass of drinking water

Toasting the audience again with a glass of drinking water, IAWD President Walter Kling expressed gratitude and happiness with an extremely effective and inspiring virtual conference that managed to bring excellent contributions from everywhere on the planet. Convinced that virtual conferencing will continue to play an important role in a post-Covid future he is still looking forward to the return of face-to-face meetings.

The Danube region as a role model

That said, he handed the stage to World Bank's Winston Yu, who summed up the content of three intense days, noting that more than 250 participants bear testament to the importance of the resilience topic.

Mr. Yu's key takeaway is that at the eve of the COP 26 conference, we realize that the climate crisis is, above all, a water crisis. Water risks feature prominently in global risk reports for governments, business and the whole of humanity. At the same time, a historic opportunity is at hand. Green programs spring up not only in Europe, but around the world, and water has a chance to become a fundamental building block for the carbon-free economy of the future.

Turning to the resilience theme and the floods and droughts that increasingly affect the Danube region, Mr. Yu mentions the World Bank Water Security Initiative and the necessity to give science and research more traction by introducing widely understood storylines.

The Danube region, the most international river basin in the world, is actually a role model for the World Bank's work on transboundary issues: "International cooperation will be a key to build resilience in our region", says Mr. Yu.

Innovation and technology were important topics during the whole conference. Technologically, the formerly quite conservative sector is on the move, with nature-based solutions, satellite imaging, AI applications and a further long list of new water technology promising leaps in efficiency and operational security, provided that governments and regulators create a friendly

environment for implementing innovative technology and the necessary human capacity is available. In this context, Mr. Yu highlights the encouraging experiences with the D-Leap programs.

He also mentions communication as an all-important and often underestimated tool to create synergies. Reducing complexity to make the sector's issues understandable for the public is a critical task.

Lastly, the Covid 19 crisis has brought financial, technical operational challenges, exposing existing weaknesses and teaching an important lesson about the need to improve resilience. The sector has mostly coped well, but the negative impact of the crisis will be felt for years. "All the more important is getting together, working together, learning from each other and building on each others' wisdom", says Winston Yu.

"I feel that this crisis has brought a huge opportunity to change, and the Danube Water Program, working in synergy with other partners, has the tools for change. Can we build back better? I think we can."

Fixing a running train

Next to take the stage was Vesna Muslic, President of the AQUASAN Network, an association that started out in 2010 as an informal network to strengthen cooperation amongst relevant stakeholders in the water sector of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ms. Muslic refers to the frequently quoted definition of resilience as an "ability to be happy and successful after something bad has happened", warning that "this something bad hasn't happened yet – climate change is and keeps happening. We do not have the luxury to put the event behind us. Instead, we will have to fix the train while it is running." In this context, Ms. Muslic reminds us that utilities and their problems need to be understood by governments:

"I cannot stress enough the need to improve understanding. We need to put water on top of the agenda to create a sustainable business environment for utilities."

The intersectorial approach

Ivan Zavadsky of the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) wholeheartedly agrees, demanding further that decisionmakers need to understand the transboundary complexity of water.

"Many think that the responsibility is on the sector side, but on the other hand there are so many players who influence decisions with huge, long-term impact on the availability of water."

Mr. Zavadsky reports that in the face of ever more frequent weather extremes, the ICPDR has had to widen its focus from cleaning up water to look at water availability as well, also mentioning that in wide parts of the region, wastewater treatment is still not up to date. He calls for intersectoral efforts to address the present and future challenges: "We have to work with

other sectors like navigation, hydropower, agriculture and industry to achieve sustainable development”, he says, calling for a holistic view of the Danube basin. Much like Vesna Muslic, he sees the water sector challenged to communicate and increase awareness:

“We need to teach voters what to demand from their governments, and make governments listen to their voters.”

A party-crashing surprise

Before formally closing the event, Walter Kling and Raimund Mair announced a party-crashing surprise: During the conference preparations dozens of colleagues, partners and friends had teamed up, producing a video full of emotional messages that celebrates Danube Water Program Coordinator and Head of the IAWD Technical Secretariat Philip Weller who is about to retire. Visibly challenged to keep up his poker face, Mr. Weller thanked the well-wishers, the 80 speakers and panelists, the 250 participants and a long line of supporters, replacing the obsolete “I wish you a safe travel home” with a simple “Stay safe!”, thus closing an exciting and inspiring Danube Water Conference 2021.