

DANUBE WATER FORUM

OPENING AND KEYNOTE: THE RELEVANCE OF DATA FOR WATER MANAGEMENT AND SUSTAINABLE SERVICE PROVISION

All that was said, shown and asked: The summary for those who could not attend, or wrestled with their Zoom connection, or felt a bit overwhelmed, because this was indeed a fast-paced opening session.

First to address the audience in the first Danube Water Forum ever were World Bank/Danube Water Program's Raimund Mair and IAWD's Philip Weller, presenting the program, the hosts and the speakers.

Originally introduced to bridge the gap between the biennial Danube Water Conferences in Vienna and to create a live event that rotates through the region, the Forum wound up holding its premiere in the virtual space.

“We all had to adapt our professional and personal lives to the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic”,

commented Mr. Mair, noting that the Forum theme “Importance of Water Sector Data in the Digital Age” was an especially lucky choice.

Instead of addressing an international audience in the conference venue of Banka Luka in the Republika Srpska, the organizing team had to welcome the participants to the cyberspace.

Welcome - from Banja Luka to Vienna

Mr. Milan Gavric, Deputy Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of Republic of Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina used his welcome address to remind the audience that data in itself mean very little, but data shared, exchanged and used for the common good can make a huge difference.

Both the Deputy Minister and Mr. Igor Radojicic, Mayor of City of Banja Luka, had kept up their support for the event despite the forced migration to the digital space. Mr. Radojicic welcomed the audience with a compact presentation on Banja Luka in general and especially the challenges and ongoing improvements of the communal water supply, closing with the hope that the next Forum will convene in Banja Luka.

Next to take the stage was Ms. Elisabeth Gruber, representing the Austrian Federal Ministry of Finance, a steadfast supporter of the Danube Water Program. In her address, Ms. Gruber remarked that the recent pandemic crisis had thrown a glaring light on the importance of a functioning, safe water supply. She noted that the Forum's data-related theme could not possibly come timelier and cited the Danube Water Program's COVID crisis response webinars and the recent discussions on tracking COVID in wastewater as examples for the value of data.

IAWD President Walter Kling wrapped up the welcome round, expressing regret that the Forums original intention to go out into the regions needed to be postponed, but also noting with some satisfaction that the water sector has quickly learned to make good use of the digital tools at hand. In this context, Mr. Kling also reminded the audience to visit the recently relaunched IAWD website "Voice of the Danube" and to register there to access a wide range of valuable services for water sector professionals (www.iawd.at).

Host Raimund Mair then got the ball rolling with a handful of theme definitions, quoting, among others, author Daniel Keys Morton's "You can have data without information, but you cannot have information without data" before inviting Forum participants from more than 20 nations on three continents to welcome the first keynote speaker, Joachim D'Eugenio.

The European perspective

Mr. D'Eugenio, Policy Advisor in the Directorate for 'Quality of Life' (ENV C) at the European Commission's Directorate General Environment, presented deep insights into the reorientation process that the EU is currently undergoing.

While the continent is busy coping with the ongoing pandemic, the EU is quietly reinventing itself as a "Next Generation EU", served, to quote Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in her State of the Union speech last September, "by an economy that cuts emissions, boosts competitiveness, reduces energy poverty, creates rewarding jobs and improves quality of life. A world where we use digital technologies to build a healthier, greener society."

Mr. D'Eugenio reports a bit of an initial surprise at this highlighting the importance of data, but things quickly become clearer when looking at the anatomy and implications of the European Green Deal, a long-term visionary agenda to transform Europe and prepare for the pending climate, resource, pollution and biodiversity crises. It establishes targets of relevance for water policy, in particular the restoration and river continuity target, marine protection targets, the holistic Farm to Fork system, the Circular Economy approach, the Chemicals Strategy, and the Zero Pollution Action Plan.

"Data is really at the heart of the current debate in Europe!"

One of the prerequisites for this transformation is the European Data Strategy, a game-changing approach that puts data at the center of practically all economic developments. It aims at creating a Common European Data Space, a single market for data where data are made widely available across sectors according to fair, practical and clear rules for data access and

use, to all those who create and innovate. This Common European Data Space will cover a variety of thematic areas. For the data-rich water sector, it promises digitization possibilities on many levels, and ultimately the fully digital water process.

Mr. D'Eugenio closed his presentation with a long list of links for those who want to take a closer look at the EU's ambitious plans (please [download his presentation](#) for further reference).

The anatomy of a municipal data system

Next to take the stage was Maja Medenica of the Belgrade Waterworks and Sewerage Management, covering the municipal perspective on the data theme. On the European Data Strategy, she comments, "I'm happy that we now have a Europe-wide vision. Let's get on board. The benefits will be huge." Ms. Medenica should know, because over the last 15 years the Belgrade Water Works have taken a step-by-step program to install an exemplary asset management program which integrates all available water and sewage data.

"International initiatives and projects push us to sit down and work on improvements."

Ms. Medenica's message to the audience: "It is important to know and use your data. It is important to have a system in place to process them. It will help you to take better decisions, make better plans and improve your cooperation across departments and with municipalities. It will also improve your customer services. Utilities that do not yet have this should start working on it tomorrow and let us be grateful for international initiatives and projects that push us to sit down and work on improvements. They boost our performance." For those who doubt the merits of in-depth data gathering and processing, Ms. Medenica offers anecdotal evidence: "20 years ago, we estimated that Belgrade's water system counts some 2.500 kilometers of pipeline. After analyzing the data, we now know that is rather 4.000 kilometers, and we can plan repair and maintenance capacities accordingly."

Managing data to manage a river

Adding a regional angle to the earlier presented municipal and continent-wide perspectives, Mr. Dragan Zeljko of the Sava Commission took the stage. Over the last 15 years, the Commission has been in charge of the Sava River Basin water resources, including a sustainable water management.

"We are ready for the coming challenges and opportunities!"

Charged with the coordination of establishing integrated information systems, the Commission watched over the setting up principal standards and formats to integrate 15 different data systems into one quite elegant and, more importantly, reliably working solution. In 2018, the Sava Commission introduced an exemplary flood forecasting system with backups. Mr. Zeljko welcomes the developments connected with the European data strategy with all the challenges and opportunities it promises, closing the day's first session on an optimistic note.