

DANUBE WATER FORUM

CLOSING SESSION: WRAP UP AND REFLECTIONS ON KEY MESSAGES

How we wrapped it all up: The summary report for those who missed the final Danube Water Forum session and a lively exchange between a great panel and a big audience.

The last and final session of the first Danube Water Forum saw a refreshing and entertaining format change: Moderator Monika Weber-Fahr, Senior Advisor Results and Partnerships at the World Bank, led a discussion that involved two highly qualified panelists and audience participation via the Pollev tool.

For a warmup, she first summed up the findings of all previous sessions and then put a number of question up on Pollev, finding that the majority of those who answered are not yet able to share data due to a lack of appropriate systems, that they see a change with a horizon of five years, and that financial and capacity hurdles are the greatest challenges in this respect. Yet, there seems to be considerable motivation, with expected effects of data-driven management ranging from improved energy efficiency, leak detection and drinking water quality to improved productivity, a qualified background for discussions with governments and donors, and also efficient fraud fighting.

Panelists were Lindita Sotiri, Director of European Integration at the Albanian Ministry of transport and roads infrastructure and water sector veteran Teodor Popa, IWA fellow, expert for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and for the World Bank, and long-time Financial Manager of water utility company APA Brasov in Romania. Expertly led through the dialogue by Moderator Ms. Weber-Fahr, both answered to Pollev survey results and questions from the audience.

There were moments of thoughtfulness when Lindita Sotiri looked back at this extraordinary year and found an upside in the growing appreciation of formerly much criticized digital, paperless integrated administration systems as a long-term side effect of lockdowns.

“Sometimes we take things for granted and do not realize how important certain exercises are, until we find ourselves confronted with a crisis,”

she remarked, and Monika Weber-Fahr assisted:

“You need a good crisis to appreciate what digital solutions can do for you.”

Generally, when reviewing the challenges companies face during their migrations to data-driven operation, the panelists found that “people problems” often outweigh hurdles like financial or organizational constrictions. A great lot of energy is spent convincing decision-makers, management and staff. “You have to convince people that transparency has benefits for everybody, that you do not gather data to punish people, on the contrary, you help them improve, and you have to make decision-makers understand that investments in data infrastructure are at least as productive as the next hundred meters of pipe”, comments Teodor Popa. He points out:

“We gather data to improve, not to punish people!”

He mentions a call center his company installed for customers, aggregating all customer data, from invoices to problem reports. The investment enabled four operators to handle 400.000 customers, with a call reaction time of eight seconds average, and qualified answers given within 45 minutes. “I wish all our companies could be like google, knowing what you want to do, almost before you yourself realize it”, says Mr. Popa.

Eventually winding the lively exchange down, the panel made room for one of the founders of the Danube Water Program, David Michaud, Practice Manager for Water Global Practice at the World Bank. Apart from remarking that he almost feels like part of the community’s furniture, Mr. Michaud stated his appreciation of the incredible journey the DWP had over the last seven years: “Here at the Forum I have seen a whole new quality of conversation. Back then we wondered if we would and really should... - Now we are discussing how do we do it.”

“We have reached a really nice point”,

David Michaud concludes. “Let us be grateful and thank all our supporters, all the speakers and panelists, and also the huge team that works in the background. Thank you – and congratulations!”