

# WEBINAR SERIES

## Utilities Fight COVID-19

### Outcome Brief

## Second Session: Crisis Management: Strategy, Assessment and Decision-Making

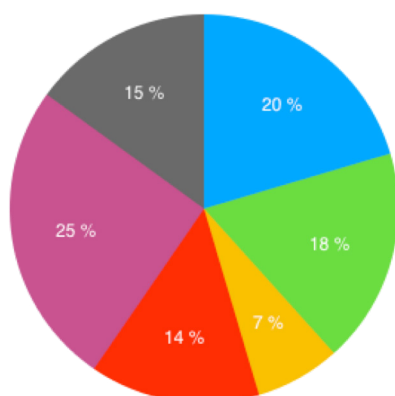
2 June 2020, 13:30 – 15:00 CEST

152 Participants

Gender balance: 49% female, 51% male

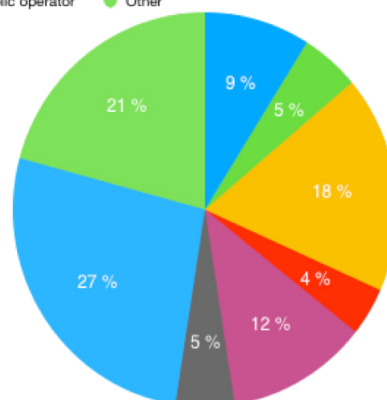
Regional representation

● MENA ● L. AMERICA CARIB. ● N AMERICA ● ASIA ● EUROPE  
● AFRICA



Type of organization

● Academia ● Business ● CSO  
● Local government ● Multi-lateral organization ● National government  
● Public operator ● Other



### Introduction

The COVID-19 emergency has emphasized the critical role of water utilities for our societies. As countries were hit hard and unexpectedly, water and sanitation operators have had the duty to show resilience to fulfil their mission as well as to adapt rapidly to ensure both the continuity of essential services for all and the safety and health of workers in the frontline and citizens. These efforts have required immediate organizational and operational measures: from the setup of crisis units and development of emergency strategies to adaptation to a permanently evolving, uncertain situation.

With such an unprecedented crisis, cooperation and solidarity amongst operators have proven necessary instruments to face the challenges and seek new solutions and methods to maintain essential activities. The webinar, co-hosted by Aqua Publica Europea (APE), reviewed emergency responses, measures adopted and management approaches, and opened a conversation on the future, including sustainable operational changes and planning for resilience. Key questions addressed were: What have been the most urgent operational challenges during the crisis? What measures were taken to address them? How has the crisis changed the relationships with regulators and health authorities? What potential long-term consequences and new business models are emerging?

## Key Elements to Ensure Resilience and Lessons Learnt

The webinar opened with a keynote by **Mr. Milo Fiasconaro**, Executive Director of Aqua Publica Europea, the European Association of public water operators, which facilitates cooperation and exchange among utilities providing water and sanitation services to over 80 million Europeans. Mr. Fiasconaro presented the publication 'European water operators' response to COVID-19 emergency: lessons learnt', under preparation in partnership with GWOPA. The report contains lessons and experiences to help utilities become better prepared in case of future crises.



*"Water operators needed to act quickly, adopt contingency plans and, above all, ensure the continuity of service while minimizing risks in a context of high uncertainty (...) There was and still is a strong need from water operators to exchange with each other what needs to be done."*

Mr. Fiasconaro explained that operators that had put in place risk management procedures before the outbreak of the pandemic were able to adapt quicker and more swiftly to the situation. Mr. Fiasconaro added that procedures to collect and process information and data has been particularly relevant in order to quickly make decisions and report them. Furthermore, robust IT infrastructure and stock of critical supplies such as PPE or chemicals for treating and monitoring water are equally important to ensure resilience.

Mr. Fiasconaro finalized his intervention by reflecting on the main lessons learnt and the opportunities of the crisis for water operators, such as improvements on the relationship between utilities and its customers, the strengthening of cooperation internally between departments, speeding up the processes of digitalization and new approaches of water operators' financing.

## Utilities' Experiences from Around the World

The webinar brought together water sector actors and partners from all regions. The panel discussion comprised of the following five utility representatives:

**Ms. Cristina Arango Olaya**  
EAAB  
Bogotá, Colombia



**Eng. Akram Nassar**  
WSSA  
Bethlehem, Palestine



**Prof. Hamanath Kasan**  
RandWater  
South Africa



**Mr. Leonardo Vasquez**  
Zamboanga City Water District  
Zamboanga, The Philippines



**Mr. Armando Quazzo**  
Società Acque Metropolitane di Torino  
(SMAT gruppo), Turin, Italy



## **Utilities' key experiences, successes and challenges in terms of operational issues in responding to COVID-19**

- Utilities had to adapt very quickly and intensely when the crisis struck as lock-down measures were put in place along very short timelines, often within days and in some cases in a matter of hours. Operators who had risk management methodologies in place adapted quicker.
- Staff management measures, such as employee well-being and work-from-home protocols, required new systems for internal coordination and rapid implementation. It also required rapid access to equipment such as PPE.
- IT infrastructure has quickly become an essential component for day-to-day management, for both internal and external coordination. Safety and security of IT systems are very important.
- Ensuring critical supplies has proven difficult, especially for those utilities who do not have financial flexibility or easy access to stocks.

### **Medium to long-term considerations**

- Water utilities will experience different situations in terms of water demand and other changes impacting on their operations. Solutions must be tailored accordingly.
- Technology is an enabler for internal workflows and collaboration, and critical in ensuring service continuity.
- Preparedness, moving from a 'just-in-time' to a 'just-in-case' approach, should be the new normal and many of the changes that are currently being experienced are here to stay. For example, a stock of essential supplies should be maintained.
- International networks for exchange and learning are important as sources of knowledge and possible solutions.

## **Key messages and recommendations**

- Most water and sanitation utilities worldwide were not prepared for a global pandemic – utilities had to rethink organizational structures and include and improve both risk management approaches and information collection procedures to be able to cope with the crisis.
- The crisis has been managed with two main objectives in mind: ensuring the continuity of service and keeping the staff safe.
- Teamwork and knowledge sharing have proven to be essential to address the COVID-19 crisis.
- The development and implementation of Contingency Plans and Recovery Plans is crucial to be prepared for future crises.

Three polling questions were put forward to participants with the following responses:

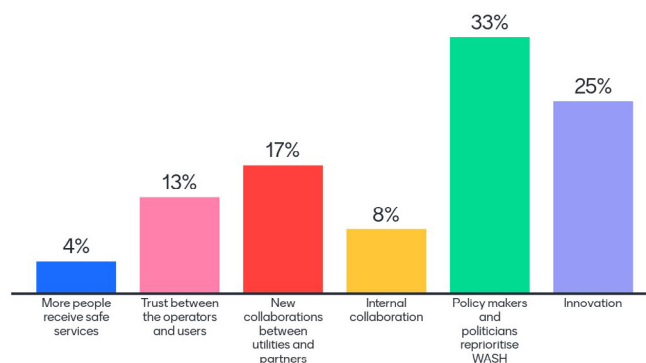
## 1. Biggest challenge for utility operations as a result of COVID-19?



## 2. What support do utilities need most to prepare for emergencies like COVID-19?



## 3. If COVID has a 'silver lining' for service providers, what is it?



## Cases of Utilities' Crisis Management

### Acueducto y Alcantarillado de Bogotá, Bogotá, Colombia

Total population in the service area <b>8,516,879</b>	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for water 99.84%	No of connections 2,328,698
% of people in the service area living in informal settlements <b>0.86%</b>	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for sanitation 98.83%	No of employees 3,187

Key challenges in emergency planning and response:

- Develop and implement a new way to operate the company

Key actions taken:

- Implementation of remote work for all administrative employees and for those whose tasks allow to do so
- Protect staff in the field by providing them with PPE and establishing security protocols and trainings
- Daily meetings with the board of directors to guarantee the continuity of operations and the quality of water
- Internal communications strategy to involve the employees and inform them about the situation, actions taken, and raising awareness of their roles
- Following the directive of local and national governments, the cutoffs were suspended and users who had been disconnected due to nonpayment were reconnected to the service
- Technical support to the municipality in their efforts to subsidize 1.4m2 of water to each customer to cover the extra cost and lower the impact on the bills
- Protection of financial resources and remobilization of investments

### Water Supply and Sewerage Authority, Bethlehem, State of Palestine

Total population in the service area <b>1,200</b>	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for water 95%	No of connections 15,000
% of people in the service area living in informal settlements -	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for sanitation 70%	No of employees 96

Key challenges in emergency planning and response:

- Difficulty at the beginning of the crisis due to the lack of understanding of the nature and evolution of the virus
- The demand for water increased significantly, while the infrastructure was not ready and some problems arose at pumping stations
- Bethlehem does not have a wastewater treatment plant, which caused increased concern amongst inhabitants, who feared that untreated wastewater discharged into the valley may be a source of infection
- Lack of enough financial resources

Key actions taken:

- At the beginning of the crisis, there was an intense learning process by reading resources from WHO and other authorities, to better understand how the COVID-19 can be transmitted, especially whether the virus is water-borne.
- Use of benzalkonium chlorides in the main pumping stations for water supply
- Use of chlorine for wastewater disinfection in coordination with the Health Bureau
- Disinfection of premises

## RandWater, South Africa

Total population in the service area <b>16 M</b>	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for water 90%	No of connections 17 municipalities
% of people in the service area living in informal settlements <b>20%</b>	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for sanitation -	No of employees 3,000

Key challenges in emergency planning and response:

- Key challenges early identified: how to keep operations sustainable, and how to secure employee well-being
- Materials to keep staff safe are not easily available even in emergency situations
- Cybersecurity

Key actions taken:

- Mandated by the national government, the utility runs the National Command Center to supply water to every province of the country
- Looking for and mobilizing water supply with tankers and tanks in 3,500 schools nationally
- Ensure chlorination systems
- Risk mitigation strategy, including how to ensure supplies, chemicals, or laboratories running to test the quality of water
- Screening of staff with the use of thermometers; 70% of staff working from home
- Disinfection of premises
- Set up of Joint Operations Committee and COVID-19 Task Group
- Remobilization of resources for needs that were not budgeted before the crisis, such as PPE

## Zamboanga City Water District, Zamboanga, The Philippines

Total population in the service area <b>917,478</b>	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for water 37%	No of connections 63,758
% of people in the service area living in informal settlements <b>20-30%</b>	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for sanitation 2%	No of employees 353

Key challenges in emergency planning and response:

- Financial challenge
- Difficulty in sourcing materials for leak repairs because of limited transportation from Manila

Key actions taken:

- Encouraging staff to work from home
- Installment of infrastructure to protect employees, provision of PPE and internal communications enhancement by webinars and safety protocols
- Coordination with local government to clean and disinfect the markets using water tankers, to install handwashing stations, and to deliver water to hospitals and city jails

## Società Acque Metropolitane di Torino (SMAT gruppo), Turin, Italy

Total population in the service area <b>2,875,434</b>	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for water 97.80%	No of connections 407,385
% of people in the service area living in informal settlements -	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for sanitation -	No of employees 955

Key challenges in emergency planning and response:

- Ensure the security of the connections of the computers being used for remote work

Key actions taken:

- 50% of the workforce working remotely
- Computers that were not portable were turned into portable with modems and VPN access
- Strong internal communications with staff
- Creation of an app that reads the physical proximity between workers in the offices or building premises in order to trace all employees, with whom they had been in contact, and lower the probability of transmission
- Customer service totally modified: all front offices were shut down and users were asked to use the utility' website and apps

## Resources

### Session Resources

[GWOPA COVID-19 webinar series](#)

[GWOPA YouTube channel](#)

### Further resources

[GWOPA COVID-19 Updates](#)

[UN-Habitat COVID-19](#)

### Let the discussion continue!

Webinars often raise more questions than they can answer. To facilitate further discussion, exchange and learning among webinar participants and the audience, GWOPA/UN-Habitat has opened a Workplace group. If you would like to be invited to this group to exchange questions, ideas and resources with others about water utilities and COVID-19 challenges, please kindly send an email to [info@gwopa.org](mailto:info@gwopa.org)





GWOPA

Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance

UN HABITAT  
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE