



SUMMARY NOTES

WEBINAR: Continuity of Water and Sanitation Services under Covid-19 Crisis – Challenges and Lessons Learned

15.05.2020

On 15 May 2020, SHUKALB organized the webinar “*Continuity of Water and Sanitation Services under COVID-19 Crisis – Challenges and Lessons Learned*”. The main objective of the webinar was to provide an exchange on the impact of COVID-19 on the provision of water supply and sewerage services, from the perspective of utilities and local governments.

The webinar was attended by around 60 participants from the water supply and sewerage sector in Albania, the Balkans region and beyond, representing water utilities, donors, LGUs, central government, financial institutions, private companies, and other water sector professionals.

The webinar was moderated by Elisabeta Poci, Deputy Executive Director of SHUKALB, who welcomed the participants and the panelists, and introduced briefly the efforts of SHUKALB in support of the water utilities in Albania, such as sharing valuable information during the early days of the pandemic start, dedicating a page on its website for information related to the pandemic, organizing a survey on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic in the water utilities etc.

After the welcome note, Elisabeta Poci shared a summary of the results of the online survey that SHUKALB conducted during April 2020, in order to measure the initial impact of the pandemic and actions being taken to manage risk and plan for contingencies. The full report of the survey results is found at this [link](#).

Ms. Poci introduced the panelists and invited them to share their experiences and challenges faced by their utilities in the face of COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the measures taken.

Zef Maci, General Director, Lezha Water Utility, stressed the importance of water utilities not only in providing water and sanitation services but as well in the protection of public health, especially in the case of such pandemic. Mr. Maci highlighted the good cooperation of its water utility with Lezha Municipality and the state Police, in order to facilitate the movement of utility staff and cars. The proper measures taken and the close cooperation with the authorities enabled the continuity of the water supply and sanitation services.

Evis Gjebrea, Deputy General Director, Tirana Water Utility presented all the measures taken by the utility as part of the contingency plan. The utility showed special care to the health of its staff, especially towards mothers allowing them to continue to work from home. There was no impact on Tirana Water Utility’s capital investments, which continued normally. However, the utility expects an impact on the revenues and has started the negotiations with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) for a loan to cover the operating costs associated to the pandemic situation. In March 2020 the utility faced a decrease in billing and collections, March vs.

February 2020: total billing decreased with 5%; Collection of bills for drinking water decreased with 33%; Total bill collections decreased with 30%. In April the situation improved, April vs. March 2020: total billing increased with 3,6%; Collection of bills for drinking water increased with 35%; Total bill collections increased with 32%.

Elia Zjarri, Commercial Director, Korca Water Utility stated that the key to success in dealing with the situation was the quick response, organizing the work plan and following the earliest instructions issued by the authorities. The utility cooperated with the Korca Municipality and the Prefecture in order to ensure the collections of their water bills, as well as those of their subordinate institutions and staff. At the beginning of the pandemic, the utility calculated a 10% reduction on the bill collections, but currently the situation is improving.

Tajar Bici, General Director, Gramsh Water Utility, stated that the closure of businesses and institutions had a negative impact on the billing. The lockdown of the citizens impacted negatively the collection of bills. In March 2020 the collection rate was 37%; in April was 57%, and currently the trend is improving. Despite the technical difficulties, reduced staff, the wide geographical spread, the utility managed to continue the activity by providing water supply service 24 hours a day for its consumers.

Emilia Koliqi, Deputy Mayor, Shkodra Municipality stated that water production has increased in order to meet the 24 hour a day service to all citizens, and consistently this has led to an increase in electricity consumption. Shkodra municipality allocated funds to the water utility for the purchase of protective materials and joint actions were taken for the disinfection of utility's premises and public spaces. The utility is considering the suspension of late payment fees for a period of 3 months. The utility collection rate has decreased by 25-30%, and since the utility is in charge also for collecting the municipality taxes, it has also affected the revenues of the Shkodra municipality.

After the presentations by the panelists Elisabeta Poci, moderated the discussion session with questions from the audience. One question related to the review of tariffs taking in consideration that the pandemic could possibly last for years, Mr. Maci responded: "There is no logical or legal reason for water utilities to claim an increase in tariffs at this time of pandemic".

Another question was related to have a general guide for all water utilities in Albania and Kosovo, that will include all the detailed actions to be taken in case of a pandemic. Ms. Poci responded that based on the insights gathered by the online survey, resulted that water utilities need to have a guiding format in designing the business continuity plans that affect all the business aspects such as technical, financial, human resources, maintenance, etc.

At the end Elisabeta Poci made a summary of the webinar including also the final messages from the panelists. Regardless the difficulties as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, water utilities have continued to provide services of water supply and sewerage to their citizens. This situation brings the focus to the importance of these services to protect public health for the population of Albania. It is time to communicate the value of water services to the customers and to raise awareness on the importance of paying the water bills, as the only way to sustain the work of the utilities. Lastly, cooperation at all levels (local, central but also with the academia) is essential in facing the impact of such crisis.

Ms. Poci closed the webinar by announcing the second webinar to be organized by SHUKALB to discuss the impact of COVID-19 pandemics on Water Utilities in Albania:

You can watch the full video of the webinar at this [link](#).