

**ALBANIA'S NEED FOR A CERTIFIED WORK FORCE TO ENSURE RELIABLE AND SAFE DRINKING WATER, WHILE ALSO PROTECTING ALBANIA'S RIVERS AND COASTAL WATERS FROM POLLUTION**

*June 23rd, 2015*

Next to obvious life and death responsibilities of the medical profession, no other profession in society has the same type of responsibility to protect public health as the professionals that operate and maintain our public water supply systems. Albania has relied on a steadily reducing workforce of water supply professionals that existed in the water sector prior to 1990. Their retirement from the work force, combined with the assignment of unqualified management and operational personnel with little or no direct experience in the water sector, has led to a crisis of ineffective and inefficient performance of water utilities.

To start to recover from this critical situation, there is a serious need to proceed on a parallel program of work force development and verifiable proof of competence. This would require a national program along two paths:

- **Work Force Training:** A National Training Program organized by the line Ministry and delivered on a regular annual schedule by a variety of training institutions and structures.
- **Work Force Test-Based Certification:** A mandatory requirement for professionals to be employed for designated key-positions in utilities across Albania.

It is important to have a clear understanding of two terms related to the concept being proposed:

- **Test - Based Certification** - a process by which an authorized body, either a governmental or non-governmental organization, evaluates and recognizes a qualified individual as meeting pre-determined requirements or criteria to perform in a specific function within a water supply and/or wastewater system. Such a person, who is qualified and satisfactorily passes a test, will be titled as a Certified Operational Manager.
- **Certified Operational Manager** - a person who has both the authority and responsibility to take action to treat, distribute, collect or test water and wastewater. This person can be a utility manager or an individual who routinely works in key operating areas in a water supply and/or wastewater utility.

The concepts being proposed are not new to Albania, but they do have to address the needs and standards of a country wanting to become equal to Europe in the performance of its water sector, and therefore must meet the Water Directives of the European Union.

Prior to 1990 in Albania, the water supply enterprises had fixed staffing structures with defined skill categories and skill levels. An individual in the work force was trained into a skill category, and then a system of time in a position and testing proved for both advancement in

positions and/or increases in compensation. After the collapse of communist system, the “free market system” brought an unintended liberation to the structure of the method and criteria for assigning personnel to work force in the water sector.

Since this transition to a free market system, Albania has defined a number of stated policies and has taken a number of specific actions to address the new needs of the water sector. Specifically, these include:

- Decentralization process, with a particular emphasis in the transfer of both the authority and the responsibility for the delivery of water supply and sewerage service to local government. This process will be more concentrate under the recently implemented Territorial Administrative Reforms.
- National Water Supply and Wastewater Master Plan for the delivery of water supply and sewerage services was developed to bring the services in compliance with the European Union Water Framework Directive.
- A mid-term Water Supply and Sewerage Services Sector Strategy (2011-2017) was prepared by the line ministry and approved by the Council of Ministers.

The above Strategy contains a very specific Mission Objective and Priority that addresses the current concerns regarding work force training and certification, as follows:

<b>Mission Objective 4: Invest in enhancing the capacities of the sector work force.</b>
<b>Priority Action 4.a: Establish a national program of training and certification, with training target requirements at all water utilities.</b>
<b>Strategic Goal:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Number of senior management staff formally trained and certified to perform in their assigned positions shall be 150 by 2017.</li><li>• Average number of training hours per year per staff member shall be 40 hours by 2017</li></ul>
<b>Actions:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• General Directorate to develop a national training program for water utility staff with specific courses to be made available through a variety of training institutions and methods.</li><li>• General Directorate to define staff positions that are categorized as senior management and will develop specific training courses for these to certify them to work in their assigned positions.</li></ul>

There is well founded experience with the advantages that can be attained from a comprehensive training and certification system. Some of these can be stated as follows:

- Certification is a reliable way for managers to know that staff is well-qualified to perform their jobs according to standard operating procedures.
- A certification program is a standardized and accountable approach to meet training needs and to put training resources to best use.

- When a utility invests in certification-based training, the utility and the sector generally knows that it will get results.
- Employee retention is increased.
- Certification establishes a profession of which workers can be proud.
- Responsible workers earn the recognition and respect of co-workers, managers, customers, the public and family members.
- Workers benefit from improved safety and reduced accident rates.
- Workers have enhanced career opportunities.
- Workers may be able to earn higher levels of compensation as they earn higher levels of certification.

The general elements of a test-based Certified Operational Manager system can be summarized as follows:

- A legal requirement that people become certified.
- A system of certification built on standard operating procedures, “need to know” criteria, levels of certification, and the rules by which certification will be awarded.
- A certifying body that establishes the requirements for certification, administers testing, and awards certificates to people who qualify.
- Training programs and resources that give people the opportunity to learn what they need to know to successfully take the certification tests.

The concept of test-based certification rests on some fundamental foundations as follows:

- **Training for Capacity and Skills Development:** Implement a process that starts a training program for water supply and sewerage system employees that makes training not only a priority but also a requirement for utilities to budget and ensure that their employees are provided access to the available training.
- **Training toward Test-based Certification:** Is an official proof of the individual’s professional skills, and a demonstration of the knowledge they have gained and are capable of applying in the performance of their duties and responsibilities.
- **Training for Continuing Education or Re-certification:** Is based on a system which requires and records routine, periodic training, often referred to as continuing education.

### **Why Test-based Certification?**

It is reasonable to expect that support for certification can be found within government, but resistance to test-based certification will also be largely present. The driver for this resistance is normally based on political interests being met in hiring practices, which in the case of Albania will be local government, as owners of the utilities.

It is widely-recognized that professional accountability and improved performance can only come through training and demonstrated qualification such that better professional capacities can be ensured in the water supply and sewerage sector. In turn, it is only

through independent, test-based certification of sector professionals and skilled technicians, as a requirement for employment, that the process of staff recruitment and promotion are transparent and depoliticized.

Given the current lack of experienced seasoned professionals in the work force, that could guide, mentor and oversee the development of capacity in the sector, in the near term, and the clear examples for political interference in hiring practices that have been experienced over the last 10-15 years within water utilities, it is essential that Albania seeks to establish a test-based, operator certification program, supported by regulations that require certification for employment in defined positions in a water utility.

Only when Albania has certified operational managers in every water supply and sewerage utility in the country, can it be reasonably expected that training and further certification of other types of necessary skilled technicians can and will be provided in an organized and accountable fashion. Without a conversion of the sector to professional, certified leadership in its utilities, it is a fruitless exercise to think that training of skilled technicians will have a measureable, positive effect on the performance of the water supply and sewerage sector in Albania.

For further information or to provide feedback, please contact SHUKALB in the following address.

**Water Supply and Sewerage Association of Albania**

Pjeter Bogdani Street, Build. 17 Ap. 25

Postal code 1019, Tirana, Albania

Tel/Fax: (+355/4) 2245 101

Mob: (+355) 69 60 12782

E-mail: [info@shukalb.al](mailto:info@shukalb.al)

Web: [www.shukalb.al](http://www.shukalb.al)