



WEBINAR SUMMARY

Learning and looking beyond the COVID19 crisis – A Water and Sanitation perspective

By: Dr Chantal Ramcharan-Kotze, Water Research Commission – South Africa

Developing countries, such as South Africa, are still grappling with historically rooted legacies and some of the world's most unequal societies. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed a number of gaps in terms of access to water and sanitation, specifically for the poor and vulnerable. Despite progress against Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) there remains a significant amount of effort and investment required to not only deal with a pandemic, but to ensure that a trajectory for development and a pipeline of sustainable water and sanitation solutions are prioritized.

The COVID-19 crisis, which requires strict hygiene measures to prevent infection and the spread of the disease, has shed further light on interdependent sectors such as water and the increasing pressure on health systems, the health sector and the economy in general. In South Africa 12 % of population do not have access to a basic water supply and 21.3% do not have access to basic sanitation services. Vulnerability in these areas is exacerbated by the unreliability of water services.

On Friday, 22nd of May 2020, the Water Research Commission hosted a webinar focused on the Learnings and Opportunities that the COVID-19 crisis has and continues to reveal for the development of water and sanitation provisioning. With the on-set of COVID-19 disaster management, a number of solutions were being deployed in SA including the establishment of a Command Centre with the aim of managing emergency water and sanitation interventions. According to the Department of Human Settlements, Water and Sanitation, bulk of the interventions centered around tankering services, water tanks and health and hygiene materials distribution for rural communities. These interventions were funded by reprioritized grant funding to the amount of R306 534 000. A total of 196 ML of water was delivered between 28 March 2020 and 03 May 2020 with ablution solutions moved to Phase 2. Additional considerations are being given to rudimentary water supply schemes and accelerated implementation to improve access. However, these remain interim if source development options are not considered and alternatives to tanker systems not sought.

Contributions made by the USAID-WASFIN's Dr Barbara Kazimbaya-Senkwe raised the issue of significant investment gaps in regard to WASH Systems. The financial support in Sub-Saharan Africa to address the 38% lack of water access, 67% lack of sanitation services and need to improve utility operational efficiencies, was grossly inadequate. COVID-19 responses have emphasized water as a social good, ignoring its economic impact thereby exposing WASH fragility in terms of financing, supply chains, institutional readiness and governance. Ms Nompumelelo Ntshalintshali – Motsa of Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) raised the importance of coordinated effort and leadership to drive both strategic and tactical efforts.

Looking Beyond COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis has made the lack of just transition to more sustainable solutions and services apparent, highlighting the need for urgent action. As South Africa responds to COVID-19 as well as aims to stimulate the economy post-lockdown, an opportunity exists to address many of the water and sanitation challenges in the country. The need to look forward and outline the key water- and sanitation-related initiatives that are critical to supporting South Africa's socio-economic recovery is evident.

Partners from South Africa's Trade and Industrial Policy Strategies (TIPS), Mr Gaylor Montmasson-Clair and Dr Shakespear Mudombi outlined a range of opportunities linked to both social and economic recovery. These entailed:

- Addressing Non Revenue Water (NRW);
- Investing in water demand management;
- Building ecological infrastructure;
- Off-grid and next generation sanitation solutions;
- Investing in water treatment; and
- Rolling out smart water and sanitation systems.

TIPS reiterated the need for coordination and collaboration by various stakeholders, investment of significant resources targeted towards the unserved and proactively improving asset management and infrastructure. Embracing a multi-dimensional view on access to water and sanitation is the golden thread in the national system and should not be underestimated. USAID – WASHFIN added to this the positive utility reform that is required in Africa in terms of cost coverage and the potential to blend public and private financing. A call for a new WASH-Politics was tabled to enable long-term financing and growth if as a continent and as developing economies we can come out stronger following the COVID-19 crisis.

www.wrc.org.za