

## Chapter 10

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# WATER OPERATORS PARTNERSHIPS (WOPS): PUBLIC UTILITY KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AND SOLIDARITY IN RESPONSE TO CRISIS

**W**ater operators from around the world have been sharing knowledge about coping with Covid-19 as part of the Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance (GWOPA), a United Nations (UN) agency that facilitates peer-to-peer exchange. This chapter summarizes the initiatives of GWOPA thus far, highlighting the potential for knowledge sharing based on principles of solidarity and not-for-profit collaboration to help public water operators manage the immediate crisis and seek longer-term solutions for better resiliency in the future

## INTRODUCTION

The Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance (GWOPA) is a global network supporting public sanitation and water service providers. Its mission is to facilitate not-for-profit knowledge sharing and cooperation among water operators via Water Operator Part-

nerships (WOPs) – solidarity-based, capacity-focused partnerships between peer water utilities – as a scalable and effective way to support public water utilities. Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called on UN-Habitat to mobilize global commitment and engagement in the practice during his tenure. GWOPA is now a robust solidarity network that continues to promote and support water operators’ partnerships, bringing together a strong network of public utilities, utility associations, NGOs, universities, donors and other stakeholders.

When the Covid-19 pandemic struck, GWOPA helped members face new pressures and constraints, relying on the basic principle of WOPs that, despite widely differing contexts, many of the challenges and solutions water operators have are common to utilities everywhere. For evidence, we need only look back to early 2020 when many operators were scrambling to pre-empt the crisis before it hit their shores by learning from the experiences of earlier-affected peers. This peer learning approach not only allowed them to fast-track solutions and avoid repeating errors, but also built solidarity between operators that will continue beyond the crisis.

As the global body leading the WOPs movement, GWOPA facilitated the exchange of knowledge and peer support between utilities while also, in parallel, raising awareness on the global stage of the critical role of utilities in slowing the spread of the virus. By supporting peer exchange, gathering testimonies and mobilizing network partners to advocate for measures to support increased resilience in public utilities, GWOPA has been able to start documenting the lessons learned from this experience and initiate a dialogue on how the water and sanitation sector must begin to plan for a more resilient future.

## **GWOPA’S RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS**

The initial action taken within the GWOPA network was to gather testimonies from Alliance members and partners on the practi-

cal actions that utilities were taking to face the crisis and ensure access to safe services. This was done principally through surveys and internal communication within the network. Testimonies were placed on the GWOPA website and on social media using a common hashtag (#UtilitiesFightCOVID). The social media campaign also sought to highlight public water utilities as key actors in the fight against Covid-19 and draw attention their important work in slowing its spread.

The testimonies provided a snapshot of the extraordinary measures being taken by public utilities to face the crisis in different parts of the world. Most of the experiences shared focus on immediate action or the emergency response without addressing the mid- and longer-term implications and challenges related to the pandemic. As a global alliance committed to advocating for public utilities, GWOPA was keen to draw greater attention to the potential longer-term challenges of utilities and, where possible, foster more in-depth peer exchange around the crisis. The next step was therefore to create a “community of practice” focused specifically on the immediate and ongoing response of utilities to Covid-19. The community allows for individual interaction and resource sharing among members and, as of October 2020, gathers almost 200 members. Members are mostly utility staff but there is also a strong presence of professionals from international organizations, academia and other stakeholder groups who share their knowledge on the topic. Community members exchange resources and insights with the spirit of solidarity and not-for-profit partnership that characterize GWOPA.

To help further mobilize the network, GWOPA began a series of webinars in collaboration with the German sustainable development consulting firm GIZ, on priority topics identified through the testimonies and community of practice dialogue. As an alliance made up of diverse actors, GWOPA worked with a range of partner institutions and regional platforms to bring different perspectives and knowledge to the discussion. The webinars sought to prioritize

exchanges between utility staff in different regions of the world and complement them with the views of partner organizations such as the World Bank, UNICEF Aqua Publica Europea, and GWOPA's regional WOP platforms. Initial webinars focused on emergency responses, with subsequent exchanges looking at services to informal settlements, wastewater and financial challenges (see Table 10.1). The webinars gathered utilities from different regions, at different phases of their encounter with the pandemic and with distinct local conditions.

The added value of the webinar series was that GWOPA's thematic partners were also able to share their solutions, knowledge and research on effective Covid-19 responses. Interactive polling and open Q&A during the webinar allowed for greater discussion on emerging issues facing operators as the coronavirus pandemic evolved. Interpretation in Spanish and French was also provided to ensure that utilities in Latin America, one of the worst-hit regions, and Africa were able to follow along. All discussions were captured in the webinar outcome briefs that were circulated to GWOPA's network. The webinars were also tied to the community of practice, and speakers and participants alike were invited to continue their exchanges on the platform.

## **AFFIRMING THE VALUE OF PUBLIC SERVICE**

In addition to the internal exchange activities for the benefit of members described in the previous section, Aqua Publica also worked on external initiatives in parallel with what members were doing in their own individual contexts. The main concern was reassuring citizens about the continuity of the water service. Acknowledging a high level of responsibility towards citizens, the members of Aqua Publica endorsed an early public statement published in March by the Association's Management Board. Translated into many languages, the statement aimed to provide reassurance to citizens that their water utilities were implementing measures to

ensure continued and safe services. Through this immediate commitment, public operators were transparent with citizens in a time of great uncertainty. This statement was supported in practice by uninterrupted and safe water supplies throughout the emergency.

Another widespread concern among citizens was about tap water safety. While TV reports showed supermarkets running out of bottled water, since people feared that tap water could be a source of transmission of the virus, many Aqua Publica members launched communication campaigns to reassure users about tap water safety. Aqua Publica joined this effort by creating a video that collected the campaigns of its members and by relaunching the individual campaigns on social media (see [www.aquapublica.eu/article/members-activities/aqua-publica-europea-members-ensuring-tap-water-safety-during-covid-19](http://www.aquapublica.eu/article/members-activities/aqua-publica-europea-members-ensuring-tap-water-safety-during-covid-19)).

As water services can sometimes be overlooked and taken for granted by the population, public operators have put the spotlight on the dedication of their employees during the pandemic, with campaigns recognizing and thanking those working at the forefront on maintenance, in laboratories, in customer service and in many other functions. The association produced a video gathering these individual initiatives to show the faces of the public water sector and highlight workers' crucial role in ensuring uninterrupted service (see [www.aquapublica.eu/article/members-activities/video-healthy-and-safe-water-supply-guaranteed-thanks-commitment-water](http://www.aquapublica.eu/article/members-activities/video-healthy-and-safe-water-supply-guaranteed-thanks-commitment-water)).

Aqua Publica was also in regular dialogue with various European Union institutions to ensure that essential supplies (including PPE, chemicals, etc.) continued to reach water operators despite the closure of the EU's internal borders and significant disruptions to international supply chains. Finally, Aqua Publica joined forces with other organizations in sharing and making available good practices and lessons learned from the management of the Covid-19 emergency. In particular, Aqua Publica co-organized a webinar on the emergency response with the Global Water Operators Partnership

Alliance (GWOPA) , facilitated the participation of its members to other webinars organized by GWOPA and, as mentioned in the previous section, co-published the report *Managing the Unexpected*. The motivation behind this collaboration is that water is a common good and consequently should be managed as a publicly owned service for the general interest; similarly, the knowledge and expertise generated within the public sector should be available freely for the benefit of all. The solidarity that fuels the internal activity of Aqua Publica therefore characterizes its external relations as well.

Through the combination of the online campaign, the community of practice and the webinar exchange, GWOPA has been able to capture the main issues utilities are facing with respect to Covid-19 and the responses they have been offering. While it may not be possible for governments and decision-makers to provide greater support to water and sanitation operators during this current pandemic, there will come a time in the near future when a collective reflection on these topics and the vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic will take place. Active networks and GWOPA partners such as Aqua Publica Europea have already initiated the process by capturing and documenting lessons. In the coming months, GWOPA will continue to provide opportunities for utilities still dealing with the crisis to exchange and learn. However, our efforts will also shift to facilitating and contributing to this wider reflection. For many GWOPA partners, the Covid-19 pandemic has confirmed that peer exchange is an effective mechanism to support emergency response. We would also suggest that it can be even more effective as a mechanism for disaster prevention. Fostering WOPs, peer exchange and networks of solidarity within the water and sanitation sector will help build up the resilience that is currently lacking in many public water utilities. Most water operators resorted to existing crisis management plans (for those that had them), which did not foresee a crisis on this level. Smaller utilities or those not well connected to a network of peers lost valuable time trying to improvise solutions or learn from others retroactively. Those involved

in networks such as GWOPA, or those already engaged in WOPs, were able to react quickly, consult their peers and adapt tested solutions from earlier-hit countries to their context.

**Table 10.1**  
*GWOPA webinars in 2020*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Topics</b>
April 28	Lessons from Beyond the Curve: German Operators' Experience with COVID
May 12	Utilities' Support to Inclusive WASH Access in Informal Settlements and Vulnerable Communities
June 2	Crisis Management: Strategy, Assessment and Decision-Making
June 16	COVID and Wastewater – Mind the Poop!
August 11	There's a Hole in My Bucket: Addressing Utilities' Growing Liquidity Challenges to Ensure Inclusive Service Continuity through the Pandemic
November (date TBD)	Peer Support in the time of COVID

From the WOPs documented by GWOPA over the last ten years, emergency and safety planning is a recurring focus area. This suggests that many utilities are aware that they must plan for such events but do not have the in-house capacity to do so. Under its current strategy, GWOPA will continue to promote and facilitate peer support to build utilities' resilience and advocate for the conditions that allow utilities to anticipate and recover from shocks like the one we are experiencing. As GWOPA prepares for the 4th Global WOPs Congress, scheduled for late 2021, the lessons learned from this crisis will shape the discussions and dialogues at the event to help forge more solidarity in the water sector.

## **ACTIONS TAKEN BY WATER OPERATORS**

### **Expanding access**

Through GWOPA's interaction with utilities, most were part of coordinated local health responses that involved their expertise and

technical capacities in extending water access and service coverage to those who were previously unserved. Particularly at risk are people who live in informal settlements, the homeless, those in precarious work, elderly people, migrants, refugees, people with disabilities and other groups forced to take risks for economic reasons or those who cannot access services to adhere to hygiene and safety standards. The pandemic has, in many areas, exposed deep injustices within cities and laid bare the fact that many utilities' service levels do not include the entire city but rather are only focused on formalized neighbourhoods. In Africa, for example, these neighbourhoods represent a fraction of the urban territory and house less than one third of the urban African population.

Consequently, the most visible actions taken by water and sanitation utilities were to ensure services in informal settlements. Where overcrowding is prevalent and people have limited access to basic services such as healthcare and water, several public utilities have been instrumental in making Covid-19 hygiene measures possible through temporary network expansion, mobile service units and the provision of soap in an effort to slow the spread of the virus. In one example, from South Africa's third largest city, Durban, the local government and utility scaled up static water tank operations to help serve the 200,000 residents living in informal settlements. In Indonesia, many utilities have installed handwashing tanks in public areas and in highly populated areas, with some giving free water to up to 40% of customers, mainly in poor communities.

While these measures are a priority, they are being implemented with reduced staff numbers, reduced availability of resources and at considerable additional cost to the utility. Many utilities were not able to ensure the accompanying financial and resource planning to take on new or expanded operations. Consequently, these unprecedented efforts to ensure water and sanitation services to all may seem encouraging at first glance but they carry a heavy risk. If not accompanied by the long-term resources and policy framework to maintain them, they will be discontinued after the current



state of emergency period is over, leaving utilities heavily in debt. The Covid-19 Solidarity Response Fund, led by the World Health Organization (WHO), provides a first step to ensuring that long-term development gains can be achieved and maintained through the Covid-19 response. Nevertheless, these concerns must also be addressed by governments and policy makers.

### **Halting disconnections**

Many governments introduced policy measures to require utilities to ensure service continuity, particularly for poor segments of the population. The most notable change for service providers were measures prohibiting disconnection, particularly those related to non-payment, and the reconnection of services to disconnected households. In some cases, measures included the provision of free water supply in communities where household connections were uncommon or nonexistent.

Utilities in Greece and Jamaica recounted a similar commitment from governments and utilities to waive disconnection procedures for customers unable to pay their bills. According to the National Water Commission (NWC) in Kingston, Jamaica, consumption increased by 20% in informal settlements during the early stages of the pandemic, which suggests more people were accessing services than before Covid-19. This increase is attributed to the support and funding from Jamaican authorities, as well as a strategy put in place to improve water and sanitation infrastructure and ensure reliable access to services in informal settlements. While such testimonies speak of advancing service levels, the sustainability of these gains is less certain, with many utilities highlighting a pending cash-flow crisis resulting from increased operational costs with reduced revenues.

### **Protecting staff**

Water and sanitation utilities are employers to large numbers of staff. Many utilities engaging with GWOPA's campaign highlighted

the additional challenges (and costs) of caring for staff. The pandemic has required utilities to acquire additional essential supplies in a challenging market. Usual procurement approaches have been put to the test with some collapsing due to market vulnerability. In some cases, national governments have intervened to help procure essential equipment such as personal protective equipment (PPE), which is then distributed to utilities and other key industries. In Europe, some utilities banded together to collectively purchase needed supplies. This approach has lightened the burden for some utilities and saved valuable time, allowing them to benefit from economies of scale and secure goods that may otherwise have been difficult to buy.

Additional measures taken by many utilities to protect staff have included flexible working arrangements, reduced working hours and health monitoring protocols. While defining and enforcing such measures may be relatively easy for some organizations, the diversity of roles within the utility workforce adds a layer of complexity to this changing work environment. For staff required to do on-site work, utilities had to quickly define safety protocols and ensure constant communication with all staff on the latest development of the virus and health measures.

Many operators decided to close their physical customer offices to protect both workers and customers. This shift required the rapid deployment of digital customer services and forced special measures to be taken for those not online. The effectiveness of these measures over the long term is yet to be seen, but the immediate result for many utilities has been a drastic reduction in bill payments from customers who are unable to access physical offices. The International Benchmarking Network for Water and Sanitation Utilities (IBNET) has collected data from several water utilities, which reveals that collection rates fell by 40% in the first months of the pandemic. This drop may be attributed to the inability of customers to pay or an inability to access pay points.

### **Wastewater monitoring**

GWOPA's webinar on wastewater focused less on the risks of the presence of Covid-19 in wastewater (which are extremely low) and more on the potential for utilities to support monitoring and detection of the virus. Monitoring wastewater systems for viral loads has long been a common method to track infections in urban populations and, for Covid-19, can serve as a cost-effective “early-warning” mechanism to identify hotspots. Even during the early stages of the pandemic, various utilities collaborated with research institutions to accelerate understanding around virus tracking and explore how they can slow the spread and facilitate agile responses. A joint initiative between the Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology (EAWAG) and the *École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne* (EPFL), is tracking the spatial development of Covid-19 with findings suggesting a correlation of SARS-CoV-2 load with Covid-19 infection rates over time, although further research is required. Similar initiatives are being undertaken by the utilities themselves in France and Argentina, with promising results. Such innovation further highlights the essential role of utilities in managing health crises and raises questions about how to ensure they are fully resourced and able to fulfil that role.

### **Ensuring service continuity**

Experiences from the GWOPA network highlighted that protracted crises cause supply chain disruptions and declining revenues for utilities and may also compromise utilities' capacity to continue providing these essential services. A survey of around 50 utilities by GWOPA put cash flow as the second-biggest challenge for water operators as a result of Covid-19. In the same survey, a global sampling of utilities expressed that increased subsidies and new financial approaches are among the most-needed support to prepare for emergencies like Covid-19. If the Covid-19 pandemic is prolonged, or if it is indeed followed by another crisis – be it economic, environmental or social – utilities may not have the financial or opera-

tional redundancy to respond effectively. Ways to maintain liquidity will need to be found in collaboration with government authorities, ensuring universality in service levels.

## CONCLUSION

Through our activities around the Covid-19 response, we have seen that utilities are currently operating in a context of reduced revenue and constantly shifting safety measures. These circumstances are having an immediate impact on the financial health of utilities and putting a huge strain on their ability to provide accessible services in a financially sustainable way. When facing a cash-flow crisis, utilities may be forced to increase prices, reduce operations or cut services. Such measures run counter to global targets around access to sustainable services for all and the human rights to water and sanitation. Many utilities are, however, hoping that their rapid and effective response to the Covid-19 crisis will result in greater recognition of their role, resulting in additional resources and other measures to help alleviate the current and impending challenges they face. Herein lies the core of the wider reflection coming out of this crisis: How can we ensure public utilities are prepared for and able to respond to crisis without compromising their financial and operational sustainability? From the findings of activities led by GWOPA and its partners, utility responses thus far highlight the need for the following actions:

- **Provide additional financial support and technical assistance to water and sanitation service providers**, and in particular to ensure coverage for those living in poor urban areas not connected to water networks. This will also be essential in the medium term to avoid the effects the expected economic crisis will have on services that are essential to ensure health and economic recovery.
- **Enable peer support between service providers during the Covid-19 crisis.** Service providers around the world are al-

ready showing tremendous capacity and readiness to share lessons, good practices and equipment through existing partnerships. Cooperation and exchange can continue effectively through remote exchange – webinars and learning through virtual platforms.

- **Build more resilient, inclusive and financially robust utilities.** As the immediate crisis subsides, there is opportunity for utilities to learn from this experience and increase their disaster preparedness, be it through capacity, infrastructure, safety planning, or all of the above. This requires dedicated resources, programs and frameworks to engage in capacity-building through, among others, water operators' partnerships.

Covid-19 is not the only challenge. The growing impact of climate change on water resources, treatment and infrastructure presents a significant threat to utilities' normal operations into the future. The findings from GWOPA's Covid-19 exchanges can be applied to these pressing concerns. The GWOPA network and the global commitment to peer learning between operators that it fosters is therefore a powerful tool to strengthen the capacity and resilience of utilities. The increased commitment to our principles is encouraging and suggests that a growing number of utilities, financiers and water stakeholders are recognizing that solidarity is part of the solution. The recently approved €9 million EU-WOP Programme, implemented by GWOPA, attests to this and will provide major new opportunities for utilities to engage in peer support partnerships. GWOPA will continue to lobby for such programs and call for greater support to strengthen the capacity of utilities both in the context of Covid-19 and in the framework of Sustainable Development Goal 6 and the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation. To amplify our voice, we call upon all like-minded organizations to join us in our efforts, be it through the #UtilitiesFightCOVID activities (webinars, community of practice, campaigning) or through engagement with the Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance membership more broadly.