



**The Year The 21st Century Began:
Covid-19 and Water Quality**

World Water Quality Alliance – COVID-19 WEBINAR

Wednesday 27th of May 2020, 14.00 CET

Having received an important amount of data as a result of the WWQA call entitled *SARS–CoV-2 and COVID-19 Pandemic – A call to share what we can innovate and how we can respond and assist* it was decided to organise a peer-group discussion. The goal was to explore how collaboration between interested parties could result in initiating of science, technology, innovation and enhancing of ongoing specific project work addressing the present pandemic and emerging recovery and prevention challenges facing society.

Among the latest developments introduced to the attendees here were a Sentinel system for analysing pre-treated wastewater, the guarantees required in order to ensure an efficient supply of chemicals for the supply and sanitation of water, the issue of extreme WASH and the consequences of COVID-19 regarding agricultural irrigation, bathing water and water reuse. .

The intention was to describe the situation and offer examples of actions from Europe, Brazil and India whilst stimulating the participants to tender new ideas for collective efforts that may benefit from the involvement of the UN Environment Programme and the World Water Quality Alliance at large. Furthermore, the event was designed to act a catalyst for the creation of collective or sub-collective proposals regarding possible post-COVID-19 scenarios.

The webinar was the first of two virtual highly participatory events. This first one was to set the stage based on four presentations and in-depth discussions moderated by the chair of the Strategic Advisory Committee of the WWQA, Bernd Gawlik, JRC. As a second step participants are now encouraged to prepare, in the ensuing weeks, short videos of a maximum of five minutes in length, describing projects, opinions, experiences and suggesting ideas for future implementation which would be screened during the second webinar. The second webinar is planned for first half July 2020.

Following their inspirational presentations the four speakers, Richard Damania (World Bank), Andrea Rubini (WATER EUROPE), Eduardo Mario Mendiondo (the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil) and Mukunda Upadhyay (Oxfam India), were invited to describe what had surprised them most during the present crisis, what they believed were the most important issues in relation to water quality at this time and what could be the most effective role of the WWQA at present to assist in addressing the challenges:

Some stark realities were presented to the audience. There is much uncertainty with regards to both the causes, the dissemination and the possible sanitary responses to the situation. There is, at present, no vaccine, no cure and testing has proven to be inadequate under many circumstances. In the words of Richard Damania, *'Lockdown has been the blunt reaction of an ill-prepared society for such an event'*. The economic effects, and this does not take into account

the possibility of a second or more subsequent waves during the late summer of early autumn of 2020, are the most dramatic since the end of World War II, with a drop of 5% in the GDP of developing countries and 7% or higher in more advanced economies. Some of the short-term effects such as a rise in unemployment and higher poverty rates that may result as well as risk aversion, together with continued and even increased investment in capital intensive production will face society with two options. Either, it ignores the potentially devastating consequences of the situation and persists in a vain attempt to maintain the *status quo* or the global community grasps may alternatively be perceived as an opportunity in order to improve a general ecological equilibrium, generating sustainable employment, resilient food systems and production and consumption patterns allowing supply chains relying on maintained and even growing natural capital. The latter requires adapting both traditional policy paradigms and educating the general public. This necessary approach to a Green and Digital economy was also highlighted by both, Andrea Rubini and Eduardo Mario Mendiondo, whilst Mukunda Upadhyay reinforced the general opinion by demonstrating, when discussing the advantages of Citizen Science, that *'Hope is impossible without Cooperation'*.

Indeed, the principal conclusion of this first WWQA – COVID-19 WEBINAR was that all the sectors representative of the “Quintuple Helix” (Public sector, Private sector, Research and academia, citizens and cultural interest groups) must unite in order to face the present and future crises of this nature. The questions and suggestions of the 76 participants attending the virtual event tended to support this view. Bernd Gawlik when summarising, reiterated that the exchange of knowledge is a vital element of a process which appeals to the deconstruction of hitherto rigid silo-based socio-economic and scientific practices.