

Opening remarks by the UfM Secretary General, Nasser Kamel

2nd brainstorming videoconference meeting on water, sanitation and COVID-19

27 April 2020 - Via Zoom. 14:30

- The pandemic is raising questions on the water supply and sanitation sector globally, and more particularly in the Mediterranean region, which is already under stress due to the increasing water scarcity as a result of climate change. This stress has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.
- The UfMS is working on two phases in the response to the COVID-19 impacts on water:
- **First, the emergency response phase:** Access to safe water is paramount to fight the coronavirus. We need to ensure that water and sanitation systems in the Mediterranean continue to operate at high standards in order to provide safe water to our people.

We need healthy workers, assured supplies of chemicals and other essential products, and adequate maintenance of the water and sanitation systems.

Due to the high demand on the domestic water supply as the stay at home order had been enacted, the concentrations of the virus and its survival and potential infectivity in different water and wastewater matrices are yet to be confirmed. The rapidity and magnitude of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic means answers to these questions are needed quickly. It is important that water sector professionals remain informed regarding updates to information and any measures needed to protect both workers and public health in general.

- **Second, the recovery phase.** The broader water sector will be called to play a key part in the economic recovery of UfM member states. Water (in a large sense, including coastal waters) is a key input to our

productive systems – from agriculture, to energy production, industrial production, transport, or tourism. Many jobs are related to and dependent on effective and efficient water service delivery.

But for the water sector broadly, and the water and sanitation sectors in particular, to deliver those services, financial sustainability needs to be ensured.

Emergency packages to protect the population from the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis may include some form of suspended payments of the water bills. The economic crisis caused by COVID-19 will see average household incomes decrease, reducing their ability to pay for water and sanitation services. The governments' responses will see public debt increase, likely reducing their fiscal space in subsequent years to provide subsidies to different sectors.

The questions that arise are how will these developments affect the financial sustainability of the water sector? How should the UfM and other regional water sector actors react to this new context?

- Today we are glad to have this gathering from Eastern Mediterranean countries, which represent the most affected by water scarcity in our region.

This second meeting is a continuation of the first round held on April 8th which brought around the table lead water operators and experts in water and wastewater engineering to brainstorm on how to keep this important resource supplied to our communities and what measures to take during and after the Pandemic to ensure a sustainable WASH sector in the Mediterranean. We explored what needs to be done to ensure continuous support to public health by giving practical policy recommendations to our member states as we continue to learn more about this ongoing pandemic.

- The UfM and IME with the support of our donors and Co-presidencies set up the following objectives for the two phases I mentioned earlier:
- **On the one hand, for the emergency response phase**, we are working since the first day to update available information regarding water and COVID19, including through research, exchange of best

practices. Due to COVID19, a pressure on the water supply has been recorded in Jordan and Turkey, as well as in many other countries. In that regard, we particularly urge the international community to keep supporting water utilities and service providers among marginalized communities and refugee camps to avoid an extraordinary spread of the pandemic.

- **On the other hand, for recovery phase:** we are developing a new nexus between water and public health through a roadmap that keeps the WASH sector at the forefront to fight against the post-pandemic impacts, as well as to start thinking out of the box in order to assess the socio-economic impact of water infrastructures in the Mediterranean that could achieve a response both to climate change and the pandemic.
- Also it is time to start thinking forward on how to realize the action plan of the UfM water Agenda that ensures that the water sector is a contributor to the economic situation. Advancing the Water Employment and the water energy nexus is essential to create more investment and jobs in the Mediterranean. It is the time to move faster in the implementation of this agenda portfolio, as the aftermath of COVID19 will require a shift towards more sustainable production and consumption patterns.
- I thank you very much for all your contributions, which I am sure will guide us in our efforts towards achieving these ambitious objectives.
- I wish you a fruitful meeting.