

2020 Water Stewardship Event focuses on path to post-Covid-19 green recovery

The recently held sixth annual Water Stewardship Event looked at how strengthened water sector governance and stewardship practices could provide a pathway for a green and inclusive recovery from the impacts of Covid-19. Over 200 water sector representatives were in attendance for the virtual event jointly hosted by the National Business Initiative (NBI), the Strategic Water Partners Network (SWPN), the Royal Danish Embassy and supported by GlZ's Natural Resources Stewardship Programme (NatuReS).



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According to the World Health Organization, washing hands with soap and water is the single most effective measure against the spread of Covid-19, putting equitable access to water and sanitation at the centre of the pandemic response. The National Water and Sanitation Master Plan indicates that only 65% of South Africans have access to safe and reliable water services while 14.1 million people lack access to decent sanitation.

Moreover, the South African water sector struggles with financial challenges and capacity restrictions, constraining its ability to bridge the service delivery gap, a situation exacerbated by the impacts of the pandemic. These challenges are aggravated by a lack of accountability linked to the governance, management, and oversight of the sector itself. With water as a key enabler of economic growth, there is an opportunity to leverage green and sustainable investments in the sector to support South Africa's efforts to build back better.



Water as an instrument of economic, jobs recovery post Covid-19

Dhesigen Naidoo 5 Nov 2020



In the opening session, Trevor Balzer, acting director general of the Department of Water and Sanitation, appealed to the water sector to “embrace the power of partnerships between private, public and civil society to work together to close the water gap through taking a water stewardship approach”. Balzer urged local and international investors to “come and invest in our water infrastructure which remains one of the most meaningful ways to create jobs, enable economic growth, reduce

inequalities and support small, medium, and micro-enterprises”.

In a series of keynote speeches, panel discussions, and interactive Q&A sessions divided over two thematic sessions, participants explored what needs to be done to strengthen water sector governance and encourage the much-needed water investments required to support a post-Covid-19 green recovery.

Robust governance for sustainable recovery

The overarching message of the morning session was that strengthening water sector governance is a prerequisite to improve performance and bring about a much-needed recovery in the sector.

“Strong systems and institutions are needed to drive effective water resources management and expanding access to water and sanitation services,” said Martin Ginster, co-chair of the SWPN. “As we look towards the future, good water governance will be needed to ensure an adequate supply of water at an acceptable quality to prevent and fight future pandemics.”

For the public sector, this involves improving financial management and technical capacity at both national and municipal levels. Strengthening good governance requires a clear understanding of powers and functions, mandated responsibility and the inter-dependency between resource protection, usage, planning and development across all spheres of government. This understanding must be met with clear institutional arrangements that can further advance good sector governance.

In the private sector, while there is a strong focus on corporate accountability in terms of sustainability, there is a need to strengthen corporate leadership on water security specifically.



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Throughout the morning, speakers emphasised the importance of greater participation and diversity of voices in decision-making as a means of strengthening transparency and accountability. Community-led good governance practice, whereby communities are equipped and informed on how to both engage with government and private sector stakeholders, as well as hold them to account for specific actions linked to water conservation and demand management, offers a proven avenue for strengthening accountability and transparency in decision-making. Examples of such action include participatory planning and budgeting processes, deepening understanding of procurement systems and participating in planning of projects that require a balanced understanding of economic development opportunity and natural resource protection measures.

Water investments for a post-Covid-19 green recovery

The focus of the afternoon session explored the opportunities afforded by green financing. The Covid-19 pandemic has served as a wake-up call over the reality of environmental risks with human-related causes. As governments all over the world, including South Africa, make significant investments into emergency support programmes, there is a need to ensure recovery packages honour the balance between jump-starting economic growth and restoring jobs as well as protecting natural capital.

The session was opened by Tobias Elling Rehfeld, the Danish ambassador to South Africa. In his address, he urged the sector to rapidly scale up investments in order to achieve the country's water and sanitation delivery goals. Such investments can also be an important lever of economic recovery. "Water infrastructure investments in particular are crucial to stimulate growth and job creation," he said, pointing to the sector's funding deficit of approximately R300bn over the next ten years. "South Africa needs all hands-on deck, and Denmark is ready to step up our support in terms of partnership programmes, water sector technology and finance."



New report highlights role of nature-based solutions in post-Covid-19 recovery

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Opportunities for sustainable investing in the water sector include reducing water losses, repairing and maintaining water infrastructure and enabling nature-based solutions to achieve water security and improved water resource management.

"Investments in water should be used to build greater resilience and more effective management of water-related risks. At the same time, we need to reinforce water governance to ensure the reliable delivery of water for priority uses," said Alex McNamara, water and climate manager with NBI, who provided an overview of key takeaways in the closing session.

"Covid-19 has reinforced the importance of access to safe and reliable water, and we have a responsibility to learn from our experience over the last year to build back greener, stronger, and better."

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