

## Chapter 24

France Eau Publique

# ADAPTABILITY, COMMUNITY AND SOLIDARITY: PUBLIC WATER OPERATORS IN FRANCE DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

**F**rance Eau Publique is a network of public water and sanitation operators that supports information-sharing and the exchange of best practices, as well as the mutual strengthening and promotion of public water management. This chapter reports on how public water operators in France adapted to the Covid-19 crisis in the early months of the pandemic during periods of quarantine and as activities resumed. Three characteristics of public water operators are highlighted: capacity for adaptation and resilience; a deep commitment to local community; and an ability to foster solidarity at the local and national levels.

## INTRODUCTION

Although not as visible as essential workers in the health professions, local water authorities and their public operators and employees in France can be proud of the work they have accomplished during the Covid-19 pandemic. Public water and sanitation service providers in the country have been able to adapt in record time to guarantee the delivery of high-quality public services and protect the health and safety of their employees. Many have been able to continue with major infrastructure projects. They have also been able to be flexible in their procurement procedures to remain re-

sponsive and supportive of local suppliers and service providers. In so doing, they have contributed to the survival of local businesses.

Even though the public health crisis is far from over, and other crises have emerged, public water operators play a key role in thinking about water and sanitation services of the future. They are critical players providing a long-term vision and strategy that anticipates transformations for a sustainable water future.

## DURING THE CRISIS

In France, the lockdown period between March 17 and May 11, 2020, was the height of the crisis and an exceptional moment in the life of water and sanitation services. During this extraordinary period, public water and sanitation operators faced many difficulties. One of the main challenges was to adapt to the various legal and regulatory frameworks that were constantly changing. Some water and sanitation services set up a special Covid-19 legal watch. Operators had to deal with sometimes contradictory interpretations and health requirements that varied depending on jurisdiction.

The operators had to manage the dual priorities of providing service continuity and guaranteeing the health and safety of their staff. This challenge resulted in the drafting and implementation of business continuity plans, followed by business resumption plans, to support various functional and operational departments and to ensure the continuity and adaptation of activities. In terms of human resources, operators managed to shift to telework within just a few days even though it was the first time for many. Operators carried out daily monitoring of each employee's situation (whether they were in quarantine, their health and mobility status, whether they were working from home or performing childcare duties). They drew up safety instructions on an ongoing basis and increased internal communication to inform, reassure and raise awareness. Payroll was another challenge, but it was not interrupted thanks to various electronic management tools.

Supplies and inventory management represented another major test during the crisis. Like all business sectors, the water and wastewater services encountered difficulties in obtaining supplies, such as personal protective equipment, but also generators, replacements parts and IT equipment. Since April 1, 2019, local authorities have been subject to the Public Procurement Code, which stipulates the rules relating to public contracting. This regulatory framework is designed to guarantee the transparency of public procurement but also provides for flexibility in the event of an emergency. Public operators have used this flexibility to be responsive and place orders with local suppliers within shortened procedural deadlines, which ultimately enabled them to cope with the crisis and avoid excessive stock shortages.

During lockdown, all public facilities, including customer service centres, were closed. While several facilities were able to maintain telephone service by diverting calls to agents' home phones, not all were able to do so due to a lack of adequate technology. Billing was another major issue due to the suspension of meter reading during quarantine. To compensate, some operators asked users to transmit their own readings, while others set up flat-rate billing, using the average daily consumption history of previous years as a basis for invoicing.

Most have introduced options to allow users to stagger their payments and to encourage them to pay by electronic means. Some departments were affected by the suspension of the public mail service. Online agencies, which were already being deployed before the crisis, were heavily solicited to maintain the link to subscribers, to inform them of various procedures, and to enable them to pay their bills online. To reduce the burden on staff, only essential activities were performed. The processing of invoice claims and tax relief requests, the installation of new connections, and routine maintenance of the facilities were temporarily postponed.

During the lockdown period, some operators were affected by significant variation in water consumption. The first to be impacted

were industrial and commercial sectors, where water consumption fell due to the closure of companies and production centers. College towns and urban centers also emptied, with the departure of students and the move of many city dwellers to their second homes. As a result, there was an unusual influx of inhabitants in rural areas and major increases in water consumption there, combined with a decrease in urban areas. For example, in April 2020, Eau de Paris noted a 20% drop in drinking water consumption in the capital.

The impact of the crisis on cash flow has varied from one operator to another. There has been an increase in requests for suspension or modification of payment schedules. In Lille, the collection of invoices was suspended due to the temporary closure of the treasury processing center.

## **RESUMPTION OF ACTIVITIES: AN EVEN GREATER CHALLENGE**

There was general agreement that the resumption of activities was more complex to manage than the initial period of confinement. Unlike the period of lockdown, which had a clear beginning and end, the resumption of activities in May 2020 brought far more uncertainty.

The main difficulty for human resources departments has been to manage the very wide variety of employee situations. Employees are facing various health conditions and family circumstances (e.g. care responsibilities, lack of childcare), and have different abilities to work from home. Managers have had to deal with some employees' fears about returning to work as well as the impatience of others who are eager to return to work. The application of special measures that regulate temporary labour contracts in France has been particularly difficult for utility managers to understand due to the imprecise nature of regulations regarding whether or not water and wastewater utilities qualify for these employment schemes.

Equipping employees with quality personal protective equip-

ficant challenges. Securing enough masks was particularly difficult due to stock shortages and long delivery times. Some operators distributed protection kits for their employees (gel, gloves, disposable suits, single-use masks) while others chose to focus on compliance with physical distancing, including a total reorganization of the office in order to direct traffic flow and changes to employee schedules. Physical distancing also requires the modification of equipment such as utility vehicles, which have been outfitted with Plexiglas to avoid contact within the same vehicle.

The re-opening of offices also required an adaptation of facilities that serve the public: the provision of protective equipment for customer service representatives and visitors (e.g. masks, visors, screens, hand sanitizer at each entrance), the introduction of scheduled appointments to prevent customers from contacting each other, the removal of documents from waiting rooms (flyers, leaflets, etc.) and training agents to encourage users to comply with public health recommendations. The resumption of activity has also meant a spike in activity for customer relations services. Public utilities have received an increased number of requests for tax relief, as well as an increased number of requests related to new and old accounts due to the resumption of real estate sales.

The choice of whether or not to continue major construction projects differed according to the operators: while most suspended all projects during the peak of the crisis, some priority projects were nevertheless maintained, particularly those relating to water supply infrastructure in anticipation of future droughts. To support construction companies in the context of the health and economic crisis, some operators signed protocols with the main representatives of the construction industry in order to be able to return safely to work. For example, in June 2020, the unions representing construction workers and water workers in Alsace-Moselle jointly defined new health and safety protocols for construction sites and negotiated provisions for increased health-related costs due to Covid-19 for contracts already signed or in progress.

## THE STRENGTHS OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT DURING THE CRISIS

Although the crisis impacted stakeholders in both public and private sectors, it has nevertheless revealed some of the advantages of the public management model. Three qualities of the public management model were highlighted by the crisis: a capacity for adaptation and resilience thanks to an agile organization; a public service deeply rooted in local community and territory; and the ability to foster solidarity at the local and national levels. Passionately committed to their mission of providing an essential public service, employees were the real drivers behind this success.

### **Adaptability: a great capacity for reactivity and resilience**

In terms of internal organization, the shift to teleworking was a major accomplishment that represents a radical change in workplace culture. Before the pandemic, teleworking was viewed as something that was elusive and difficult to implement. The crisis accelerated the transition to the digital age. Telework was deployed very rapidly the day after the announcement of the lockdown. It has since been rethought as to how it can be integrated as activities resume. Some operators have opted for a gradual and then total return of teams in the field; others have seized the opportunity to rethink their operations. In that process, some have sought to make teleworking – which until the crisis had been the exception – a common practice. For example, the SPL O de Aravis decided to move to teleworking one day per week for managers, and one day per month for technicians. The latter is possible since data operations and maintenance for facilities can now be done remotely thanks to digitalization.

IT security is an essential prerequisite for telework. Faced with increased cybersecurity risks, some operators have undertaken major IT projects to continue to have access to the business software essential for maintaining activities (e.g. online customer servi-

ce agency, invoicing, HR, finance, etc.). The urban community of Niort, for example, has hosted its business software on a specific server and set up a secure system allowing restricted access to a certain number of employees.

The further ahead an operator was in moving to virtual work, the better it was able to manage the crisis and guarantee business continuity. For example, the electronic signature has proved to be a particularly invaluable asset. Managers have also been forced to innovate to maintain relationships with their teams and to strengthen social cohesion despite distance. To do this, operator managers have employed a variety of initiatives, including:

- Distribution of filmed interviews with managers to explain the crisis plan;
- Organization of live question-and-answer sessions between management and employees (e.g. Vienna water workers' union);
- Setting up weekly field trips for managers to meet with agents and provide them with support (e.g. Sourcéo);
- Systemic telephone check-ins, particularly for on-call teams, who receive a call from a manager every morning and every evening;
- Circulation of regular internal newsletters;
- Organization of cross-functional meetings where employees are able to present their activities and report on how they were adapting to the crisis (e.g. the "Radio Café Sources" online conference series organized by Eau de Paris).

However, uncertainty has also caused tension among employees, who sometimes had difficulty understanding and accepting the choices made by Human Resource managers relating to leaves, temporary contracts, etc. To respond to the significant stress that employees were experiencing, managers have tried different initiatives to reinforce employee motivation and commitment. Some called for internal solidarity, encouraging employees to volunteer to take leaves. Others chose to rotate leaves to put everyone on an

equal footing. Some managers also offered bonuses to reward the most committed agents.

Several operators set up psychological units to accompany employees and offer them personal support (e.g. Eaux de Vienne). Nevertheless, not many employees used these services during the confinement period, at least not for their intended purposes. They tended to call with questions associated with the resumption of activities, such as questions related to labour law.

This period has resulted in innovative solutions to craft new internal communication tools and create social bonds despite distance. Paradoxically, while employees were further apart, the confinement made it possible to reinvent inter-personal relationships. All operators have noted a strong ethos of solidarity, with employees paying greater attention to each other, even outside the circle of close associates. The evolution of internal communication has contributed to this change in outlook, with greater importance given to social media platforms, such as the creation of WhatsApp groups. The fluidity between private and professional life has also contributed to changing perceptions and has helped to humanize relationships. Managerial relations have also evolved: they have become more direct, with managers making regular contact with their teams, and more horizontal, encouraging solidarity initiatives between agents.

### **Proximity: the strength of the territorial network**

By nature, public actors derive their identity from the territory to which they belong. Integration into a network of local players, whether suppliers or contractors, has proved to be a major asset in terms of efficiency and responsiveness. Thanks to their privileged relationships within regional buyers' groups, public operators have been able to benefit from the exchange of contacts of available suppliers that help overcome constraints in supply, such as that of personal protective equipment, and compare prices. By calling on local supplier networks, public operators have thus helped to keep the



local economy running and maintain employment in the regions.

The fact remains, however, that the scattering of public players throughout the territory has sometimes limited their effectiveness. Compared to private operators that have centralized purchasing departments on a national or even international scale, public operators have had difficulty pooling their requests and sharing contacts with suppliers. The relative isolation of certain public management players in the same region has also slowed down cooperation.

Despite this, public operators have maintained (or even strengthened) a special relationship with users. Thanks to digital technology, specific information supports have been created to keep the link with the users: special question-and-answer sessions on operators' websites, multimedia communication campaigns, electronic mail-outs and personalized text messages. Beyond the digital, telephones have made it possible to keep in touch and to strengthen human relationships.

Some operators, such as at Eau de Grenoble Alpes, have created specially dedicated on-call numbers during the lockdown. While the on-call number is normally reserved for emergencies, Eau de Grenoble Alpes deployed exceptional back and front office processing, calling back all subscribers during the day to respond to their requests. Special relationships have also been created with companies; Grand Poitiers water and wastewater service, for example, called all companies in the area one by one to assess their eligibility for the bill payment suspension system.

### **Solidarity: the emergence of new forms of cooperation**

Throughout the crisis, local authorities and their public operators were able to count on the support of the France Eau Publique network. In almost daily contact with the ministries representing local authorities and their services, the National Federation of Concession Authorities and Public Water Authorities (FNCCR) and the France Eau Publique network were particularly committed to supporting their members during the turmoil. A number of new tools

to support local authorities were deployed throughout the crisis: an open-access news feed, weekly virtual conferences dedicated to Covid-19, and the creation of ad hoc working groups promoting experience-sharing between public operators in the France Eau Publique network. All these virtual exchanges have made it possible to break the isolation and create a common front by sharing best practices.

The FNCCR has invested heavily in guaranteeing optimum service quality throughout the country, regardless of the size of the operator and whether it belongs to the network. To urgently remedy the lack of equipment, it has embarked on an exceptional operation to distribute masks to all public sanitation operators in France, including its overseas territories. Not exclusive to its members, this large-scale action ensured the safety of the agents most exposed to the risk of transmission. Between April 2 and May 20, 2020, around 243,000 masks were distributed to more than 1,300 public water and wastewater services thanks to a government allocation of FFP3 masks at the end of March and a bulk purchase of FFP2 masks at the end of April. The collective success of this operation, led at a moment's notice by the FNCCR with the exceptional commitment of its employees and members, exemplifies the values of solidarity and sharing between local public players.

Alongside this operation to distribute masks, public operators responded to the call from the FNCCR, the France Eau Publique network and the Association of French Mayors to set up an operational solidarity chain in the regions. In less than 48 hours, more than 50 departments were able to count on voluntary public water and wastewater services ready to offer emergency material or human assistance in their areas.

## LESSONS LEARNED FOR AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

The crisis has highlighted the essential role of local services while underscoring the fragility of an excessive economic dependence

on globalized structures and supplies. The upheavals of 2020 are not, however, one-off events. For several years now, crises have followed one another, whether they are of social, cyber, climatic or health-related origin, placing elected officials in the position of having to think differently and find solutions to deal with this rapidly changing context.

The upstream preparation of the structures played a role in the success of crisis management: the more crisis management was already integrated into the operators' general strategy, the better they were able to adapt and respond effectively. Nevertheless, even though some operators already had risk management teams and had been working for a long time on preparing for and anticipating crises, Covid-19 revealed the need to anticipate more and to plan crisis scenarios that could be adapted to all activities. The aim is to capitalize on this experience and create crisis management tools, whatever the type (health, environmental or digital). In particular, predictive resource management is a key point that needs to be strengthened to enable a better understanding of changes in levels of water consumption and the impact on operators' financial models. Finally, the crisis has highlighted the need for reflection on quality and certification approaches. While some organizations, such as the Water Workers' Union of Alsace-Moselle, are currently working to integrate the UN's Sustainable Development Goals into their development strategy, others find that certification criteria are too restrictive and do not allow the necessary flexibility to adapt to a period of crisis.

Some operators set up "on-the-spot" evaluations as the crisis unfolded, seeking to assess the actions in progress as of mid-April by sending questionnaires to elected officials and employees in order to take stock of the situation and adapt quickly to anything that could be done immediately. In order to capitalize more broadly on the actions carried out during the crisis, and to integrate them into their general strategy, several organizations have hired consulting firms to help structure their assessment methodology.

## CONCLUSION

More than ever, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of local management of common goods, whether water, sanitation, energy, food, agriculture, local welfare, or education. These are themes and dynamics to which the public players in the water sector contribute fully, each in their own way, taking into account local specificities.

Crisis management is an inherent part of the day-to-day work of operators who deliver water and wastewater services, which are constantly confronted with network breakdowns, but it also an inherent part of a longer-term vision, such as how to deal with the impact of climate change on water resources. The challenge now is to learn how to adapt to crisis at all levels, and to develop a truly forward-looking and bold vision for the management of this essential resource.

Unlike private operators, public operators are the guarantors of this long-term vision. Unlike a concession contract, which restricts investment within a temporal and spatial framework, the public management model provides the means to make decisions based on their long-term consequences. Public operators are committed to defending and preserving water as a common good. Where water is privatized, local authorities must deal with private operators who refuse to go outside of their mandates as defined in their contract. Public operators, by contrast, feel that they have a genuine mission to serve the public good. Employees are at the heart of this movement, ready to commit their time and energy to guarantee service quality.

Through the actions of employees, field and support functions, and elected officials, the crisis was overcome by a collective commitment to a priority mission: that of providing an essential public service that played a crucial role in combating the pandemic (e.g. washing hands). The crisis has broken down borders and hierar-

chical walls, fostering greater proximity within communities and changing the way people look at things.

Thanks to the long-term perspective of public management, public operators prioritize creating strong internal relationships – a process that takes time – over short-term considerations of profitability. In concrete terms, this orientation allows for greater flexibility and responsiveness, and an agile management style that prioritizes social dialogue and the search for quality of life and meaning at work.

Integration into a flexible territorial network enables public players to be part of a living, changing network, which knows how to adapt and modify its form as crises occur. Depending on their needs, public players can pool their skills and reinvent the scales of territorial action. The protean nature of public operators makes it possible to develop synergies between several levels of governance to create coherence and give meaning to different public policies.

At a time when France is rediscovering the major role of local levels in the resilience of territories, and when urban planners and developers are rethinking the city and development through integrated and ecosystem-based approaches, public water stakeholders are already making a full contribution to the transformation of territories. The model of public water management, which has been widely proven successful in France, Europe and around the world, is the bearer of an innovative vision of public services as a common good. With the potential to generate new forms of local governance, it contributes to the renewal of a local economy based on cooperation with a broader scope, adapted to the climatic, economic, public health and social challenges of the 21st century.

