

Quality Infrastructure institutions of Western Balkan countries innovate in response to the Covid-19 pandemic

Moments of crisis create not only hardship but also open new opportunities. In the case of the coronavirus pandemic, the spirit of opportunity and hope has been captured by the slogan “Build back better.” The unprecedented challenges due to the spread of Covid-19 have forced not only short-term adaptations but perhaps have given rise to innovations that present improvements and will remain even after the pandemic has passed.



In March 2021, PTB held a virtual exchange of experience on innovations in quality infrastructure (QI) institutions and services in the Western Balkan (WB) countries in the framework of the South East Europe Quality Infrastructure Fund ([SEE QI Fund](#)). The event was attended by more than 30 participants from metrology institutes, standards bodies and accreditation bodies. The objective of the event was to encourage innovative behavior by sharing examples of innovation activities. The presentations and discussions centered on innovations in QI institutions.

Innovation in Metrology: remote hands-on laboratory trainings & promotional campaigns



*The meter has never been more important.
Photo: Montenegrin Bureau of Metrology*

Staff at the Institute of Metrology of Bosnia and Herzegovina (IMBiH) participated in a remote hands-on laboratory training. Typically, the training on how to operate new instruments, which has a strong practical focus, is conducted by an expert on site. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions the training was successfully conducted remotely with the help of video streaming from the lab, an application (LabView) which allows automation of measurements, and a tool (Team Viewer) for remote desktop control. A careful and thorough preparation was necessary in advance to overcome some of the **challenges** of the virtual mode of the training. For example, trainees received instructions in advance on how to do the measurements setup and they demonstrated their work to the expert before the start of the training to make sure the

setup was correct. Participants from IMBiH reported some **benefits** from the remote mode of training compared to on site. They found the training more interactive, efficient (due to better preparation) and allowing for more ownership by the trainees who had to rely on themselves to implement the steps.

The Montenegrin Bureau of Metrology (MBM) innovated by launching several campaigns and competitions to raise its visibility and compensate for the inability to conduct in-person workshops and other regular activities. The MBM supported the public “stay at home” campaign by launching a competition for small children about cooking measurements and another scientific campaign for high school students. The competitions generated media coverage and higher visibility for the Bureau of Metrology. Going forward, some innovations that are considered include the development of digital calibration certificates and an e-learning platform.

Innovation in Accreditation Bodies: remote peer evaluation

In February 2021, Albania’s General Directorate of Accreditation (DPA) was successfully assessed by a team of colleagues from other European accreditation bodies in the context of a European Accreditation (EA) peer evaluation. A peer evaluation is a crucial milestone for each accreditation body as regards the international recognition of its accreditation services. One of the biggest **challenges** to be overcome was the availability of stable and fast internet connection. DPA was supported by another Albanian public institution which ensured the quality and speed of the internet connection and provided the videoconferencing platform. Additionally, for the on-site visit, DPA provided mobile devices (tablets and smart phones), hired an external company to operate the cameras and provided interpreters.

One factor that contributed to the **success** of the innovation was that the preparation for the remote assessment started already before the Covid-19 pandemic. Another positive aspect was that DPA already had an online system for customer relations and all accreditation steps could be conducted online by DPA customers.

Innovation in Standardization Institutions: focus on Covid-19 related standards

The Standardization Institute of the Republic of North Macedonia (ISRSM) made temporarily available for free download a set of 18 Macedonian standards related to protective and medical devices, anesthetic and respiratory equipment and lung ventilators as well as 30 additional ISO standards available on the ISO website. Another example of innovation related to addressing the pandemic is the quick adoption of a new document, CEN workshop agreement CWA 17553 Community face coverings – Guide to minimum requirements, methods of testing and use). The innovative procedure, agreed on a European level, ensured the adoption of this CWA in the exceptionally short period of time of two months. Another **response** to the pandemic was the adaptation of working procedures to allow committees to take decisions in online rather than in-person meetings.

Even though ISRSM lost some revenue from the provision of free standards, the Institute gained an increased visibility in the business community. For example, it promoted the availability of free standards on the website of the North Macedonian Chamber of Commerce. Similarly, the Kosovo Standardization Agency (AKS) stayed relevant by providing clarity to stakeholders about standards related to personal protective equipment as well as for all other sectors covered by standards. One of the challenges experienced by AKS is that the Agency

had invested in the development and adoption of a Midterm Strategy 2020-2025 which the pandemic quickly made obsolete.

Conclusion: Common challenges to innovation and innovative responses during the Covid-19 pandemic

Many QI institutions from the WB region faced common challenges. First, the sudden onset of the coronavirus pandemic caught everyone by surprise and did not leave time for preparation. In addition, as no one expected that the pandemic last over a year, often the default approach was to wait it out. With the close of 2020, it became clear that the pandemic has impacted the business models of QI institutions and they have suffered revenue losses from some types of services such as trainings. Metrology institutions faced particular difficulties as work from home for laboratory staff was not possible. The provision of on-site calibration services was challenging in light of health guidelines. A common problem was also the lack of big enough premises that can respect social distancing guidelines for board and technical committee meetings or trainings.

Despite the challenges, QI institutions from the WB region stayed resilient and continued their activities. The innovations in QI institutions presented during the exchange of experience clustered around developing new ways to provide services rather than offering altogether new services. Some commonalities in the responses included transition to remote types of services such as remote assessments (accreditation), remote peer reviews and virtual hands-on laboratory trainings (metrology), shift to provision of e-trainings and digitalization of services as well as online meetings of technical committees. Communication with stakeholders has also shifted online. Conducting campaigns and other awareness-raising activities was another common response to raise the visibility of QI institutions and their role in fighting the pandemic.

For specific questions regarding the innovation practices presented above, please feel free to contact the respective contact people:

General Directorate of Accreditation (DPA) Albania
Ms. Suela Mustafaraj
suela.mustafaraj@dpa.gov.al

Standardization Institute of the Republic of North Macedonia (ISRSM)
Mr. Goran Pletvarski
pletvarski.goran@isrsm.gov.mk

Kosovo Standardization Agency (AKS)
Mr. Bujar Istogu
bujar.istogu@rks-gov.net

Institute of Metrology of Bosnia and Herzegovina (IMBiH)
Ms. Esma Musić
esma.music@met.gov.ba

Bureau of Metrology, Montenegro
Ms. Anđelika Durutović
andjelika.durutovic@metrologija.gov.me

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