



YES, I CAN!

A role model for young water professionals

Dr Inga Jacobs has achieved much in the water sector during her short career. Debbie Besseling speaks to this Research Manager for Knowledge Management at the Water Research Commission (WRC) about some of the highlights to date.

You have an extensive educational background, please highlight some of your accomplishments.

I was very fortunate to have received scholarships to study in different corners of the globe, so I was able to travel and see new places from a very young age. This gave me the opportunity to experience different types of education systems in various countries, whilst meeting people from different backgrounds, and it really expanded my world view in so many ways.

Another highlight was my decision to focus on international relations, more specifically political science. With both my Masters and my PhD I specialised in water governance. It was only when I started work, that I realised how useful and applicable a political science degree can be for the water sector. The complexity of water challenges today necessitates a holistic and integrated approach and necessitates inputs from a diverse range of disciplines and expertise. I have found a home as a social scientist in the water sector.

Tell us about your current position as Research Manager: Knowledge Management at the WRC.

The Knowledge Management unit within the WRC is a relatively large unit, covering a wide range of aspects relating to knowledge sharing, knowledge dissemination and impact. The research portfolio that I manage looks at research, which involves metadata research. This covers the impact of the WRC's research in terms of policy uptake, broader public dissemination or public understanding and the overall monitoring of trends in water research and development. I also focus on the role that the WRC occupies in the water knowledge value chain in relation to other partners, and how we support each other through various collaborative projects and other agreements.

You specialise in transboundary water governance in Africa. What are some of the challenges in this regard?

It was a natural progression for me to focus on transboundary water governance because of my focus in international relations. Transboundary water governance looks at the way in which countries cooperate or develop cooperative management strategies around a shared resource,

such as an international river. It covers the role that water plays in a regional context, in terms of regional integration and how water can be used as a tool and driver for peace as opposed to what we hear time and time again, water as a potential cause for one of the next world wars.

With my main focus area, Africa, and particularly, the Southern African Development Community, I have tried to understand how countries and non-state actors negotiate and renegotiate rights and access to water. This is a core aspect of transboundary governance.

My recently published book titled, *'The Politics of Water in Africa,'* focuses very specifically on the multi-faceted notions of water security. By researching these areas, I have tried to incentivise social science perspectives in the water sector, and in fact, to promote the movement away from a sector-based silo approach, to a multi-sectoral and

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Dr Jacobs and head of the Water and Health Research Centre at the University of Johannesburg, Dr Tobias Barnard, with Deputy Minister of Water & Environmental Affairs, Rejoice Mabudafhasi, at the World Water Forum in Marseilles, France.



multi-level lens. One which emphasizes the multiplicity of actors, scale, power, knowledge and agency and the multi-faceted way in which people interact with the environment. This lens encourages the adoption of trans-disciplinary methodologies as an appropriate channel through which to address emerging environmental challenges and complexities.

Transboundary water governance however, often falls victim to the pendulum shift of priorities. For it to be an issue of national attention it requires an outward looking approach to a country's water foreign policy. Sometimes there are particular government administrations that focus on an inward looking national security and national interest, that prioritises service delivery, water access and sanitation issues within the country. Other administrations have a more outward approach dealing with issues such as the role South Africa plays in the region, how we can leverage different partnerships with other countries and institutions

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to enhance our access to water, how we can use regional dynamics also for socio-economic development.

What have been some of the milestones in your career?

Completing my PhD in International Relations at a relatively young age helped me to get a kick-start quite early in my career. But one of my biggest achievements to date has been through my involvement in the Young Water Professionals (YWP) network, a programme under the International Water Association (IWA) and the Water Institute of Southern Africa (WISA). I have served as the YWP Global President 2010-2012, and currently serve as the YWP Southern Africa President 2012-2014. The SA YWP programme is in its fourth year of existence with more than 800 student members and over 1 800 professionals, and provincial chapters set up in the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng and further afield in Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Namibia.

Young people have found the YWP programme immensely supportive in career development, networking, technical skills training, and having a supportive network of individuals who are going through the same challenges when developing their career. This includes the non-technical challenges such as

networking at conferences, or finding a mentor, or sharing the challenges of being a young woman professional in a still largely male-dominated sector. Through the YWP, these formal but also informal lessons are shared and help equip young people with the skills needed to develop their careers. Some activities include: organising and hosting the biggest conference for young water professionals biennially, collaborating with the Dutch Embassy on a business development competition for young entrepreneurs, and a host of career development events.

You have recently been recognised at the Excellence in Water Research Awards 2012. Tell us about your presentation.

The presentation, titled 'Bringing the United Nations Watercourses Convention (UNWC) home? A multi-level water governance framework in the Orange-Senqu River Basin in Southern Africa', was based on my research on multi-level water governance and specifically the idea that with international rivers, because of the multiple demands on that particular river, there is always a wide range of codes of conduct, laws and policies that govern the way counties and non-state actors cooperate around this shared resource.

The presentation specifically looked at, apart from the hardware that guides and influences how states and non-state actors cooperate, the huge area of normative software, that is slightly more intangible but yet very influential in shaping how these different actors behave in the trans-boundary context. Basically, this means that cooperation dynamics in shared river basins are not driven solely by prescribed and often imported modes of conduct, or by formal policies and institutions such as River Basin Organisations or similar bodies, but that there are other spheres of practiced collaboration, or integrationist tendencies that have developed and grown over time that tend to foster cooperation.

This includes the role of strategically placed individuals, or networks of people who share the vision of political and economic integration, as well as the role and relevance of technical collaboration, institutional trust-building; and the broader local socio-political context. Among other things it is important therefore, to recognise this reality in all spheres and to strive to retain technical skills and institutional memory through effective succession planning.

You have recently been appointed as the President of the YWP. Tell us about the role of the YWP organisation.

The YWP is a volunteer-based programme. The idea behind the organisation is to have a place where young people can go to build their own capacity and that will help them grow. The idea to link up with the IWA is that it provides international exposure for our members. This enables young professionals to find mentors through the IWA specialist groups and programmes. Our affiliation with WISA is in alignment with our aim to always remain locally relevant. Through WISA, we ensure that our members get access to local events, training and other opportunities.

The types of events and workshops that we organise have the aim of providing and fulfilling the present and the future needs of the water and wastewater industries. So it's about the continuous development of a workforce that is adequate in size and which is capable in terms of its skills and that is strong in leadership.

Through the events that we organise we try to have a key message that there are loads of opportunities in this sector and it's about applying the different skills and thinking innovatively about the contribution that you can make.

Are there any other projects you would like to talk about?

There is a particular WRC project that is going to start next year that I'm excited to be involved in. The objective is to examine the role that water plays as a driver but perhaps also a constraint of regional economic integration in southern Africa and specifically looking at the way in which water is addressed in non-water related institutional arrangements, such as for example, the regional economic communities (EECs) like SADC, SACU, COMESA and EAC.

The project's basic premise is that international rivers are increasingly important as development drivers and we know their resource potential in agriculture, and energy production. However, despite these inherent inter-linkages, trans-boundary water management hasn't really featured as an integral part of economic integration discourse until very recently. Added to this is the fact that overlapping membership to several RECs and the multiplicity and changing nature of such memberships by nation states ensures that river basins are part of an increasingly complex landscape of institutions, policies, trading relations and sectoral demands. The relevance of the existing institutional complexity presents challenges but also opportunities for sectors that are directly or indirectly involved with water issues to increasingly integrate in terms of decision-making in agriculture, energy, industry and urban development in particular.

What the project is going to try to unpack is what I call water centric institutions, such as river based organisations, catchment management agencies, or water user associations, and look at whether they are the most appropriate vehicles



through which to channel these kinds of development strategies.

Dr Jacobs regularly addresses large international audiences.

You have achieved success at a young age, what is your message to other young professionals?

I have two very simple life mottos, 'Yes, I can' and 'Commit to the road'. From my own personal experience, there are many opportunities for young people in this sector. It is about taking these opportunities and knowing how to use them to your advantage. The idea around the motto 'Commit to the road' is about perseverance. In my opinion, it is preferable to stay in job for a while to allow yourself to grow and develop your career.

My message to young professionals is that if you persevere, the water sector is actually a very vibrant place to work. Also, young people in the water sector are really beginning to articulate their voice and a vision for how they want to engage in the sector and around water-related issues. It's really just about thinking innovatively about the role that you want to play and not sitting around for someone to help you – you've also got to help yourself.

- To view Inga's interview Visit: <http://youtu.be/KwMlfpcADNw> 

