

WRC Symposium

Ensuring a better water future – together

There was a confluence of stakeholders, technologies and innovations at this year's Water Research Commission (WRC) Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) Symposium, which took place in Birchwood in September this year. Held every two years, the symposium is aimed at creating a space for the exchange of ideas and innovative thinking around solving South Africa's most prominent water challenges.

The theme of this year's conference was 'universal access wherever you are'. The theme implies a rethink of how the sector approaches access in the water and sanitation domain. It acknowledges that access to water and sanitation is not merely a question of infrastructure, but also about access to resources for food security and economic upliftment, integrated policy- and decision-making, and access to water-related knowledge.

Discussions were focused around several themes, including access to a clean environment, access to sanitation, access to drinking water, access to food, and access to water for industrial growth, among others.

"The future of human life on Earth depends on how we manage our water problems today," WRC CEO, Dhesigen Naidoo, explained the symposium objectives. "We are fortunate that we are sitting on a depository of good scientific knowledge and the beginnings of proficient technological solutions. The symposium examined how we are going to bring all of these efforts to bear to organise for the future prosperity of South Africa, Africa, and the world with regards to water."

Another strong objective of the symposium was to strengthen partnerships between key water stakeholders in terms of the sustainable development of water-related solutions. "We are seeking to cement three important partnerships, the first being among scientists globally; the second with the private sector; and thirdly, and importantly, with the users of these services and communities at large to make sure these water solutions are sustainable," noted Naidoo.

This year, the symposium included participation from the Board members of the Global Water Research Coalition, an international water research alliance which serves as a collaborative mechanism for water research. The WRC is one of the founding members of the coalition.

Delegates received a special video message from the Minister of Water and Sanitation, Nomvula Mokonyane, in which she expressed the hope that deliberations during the symposium would lead to RDI playing a bigger role in the lives of especially those South Africans who still lack access to safe water and sanitation. "We need improved mechanisms whereby science and technology can be taken out of the laboratory, into the communities and into the boardrooms where policy decisions are made."

In addition to discussions and debates, the WRC Symposium showcased a number of technologies and innovations stemming from its projects. Technologies and innovations on display included, among others, the Arumloo microflush toilet, the wave energy reverse osmosis pump, Vitasoft process for treating mine-water, the mobile lab, and the water geazer app.

A further highlight of the Symposium was the second WRC Knowledge Tree Awards, which celebrate men and women who have had a major impact in their pursuit for excellence in the water science domain. Recipients were acknowledged based on the impact their research has made in the following categories: transformation and redress, enhancing human capital development in the water sector, informing policy and decision-making, empowering communities, providing sustainable development solutions, and developing new products and services for economic development.

This year's winners were:

- In the transformation and redress category: Prof Leslie Petrik and Dr Barbara Tapela, both from the University of the Western Cape;
- In the sustainable development solutions category: Prof Geoff Pegram from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and Prof Wim van Averbek of the Tshwane University of Technology;
- In the empowerment of communities category: Associate Prof Ulrike Rivett from the University of Cape Town and Rowena Hay from Umvoto Africa;
- In the informing policy and decision-making category: Prof Olaf Weyl from the South African Institute for Aquatic Biodiversity and Unathi Jack and her team from Emanti;
- In the human capital development category: Prof Albert Modi and Prof Chris Buckley, both from UKZN;
- In the new products and services category: Marco van Dijk from the University of Pretoria and Prof Alison Lewis from the University of Cape Town.



Winners of the WRC Knowledge Tree awards.



Discussing access to services were Doulaye Kone of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Gislette Philippe of Suez Environment, Dr Nozi Mjoli from Hlathi Development Services, Adam Lovell of the Water Services Association of Australia, and Dhesigen Naidoo of the WRC.



Building international relations were Prof Olaf Weyl of SAIAB, Suresh Kumar Rohilla of the Centre of Science and Environment (India) and Dr Amit Pramanik of the Water Environment Research Foundation (USA).



Liketso Khaile, Sylvia Machimana, and Gugu Motha of the Inkomati-Usuthu Catchment Management Agency were among the delegates who attended the symposium.



Among the delegates were Zukiswa Mbolekwa-Pupuma of Govan Mbeki Municipality, Thokozani Majozi of Wits University, Thokozani Kanyerere of the University of the Western Cape and Bongani Miasi.