

WRC Board – Changing of the guard

Earlier this year, the Water Research Commission (WRC) inaugurated its new Board. Outgoing Chairperson, Prof Janine Adams, and incoming Chairperson, Barbara Schreiner, both shared a long relationship with the Commission prior to their election to the Board. They imparted some of their thoughts on how to keep the Commission real and relevant to the people of South Africa.



Prof Janine Adams

How do you see the role and value of the WRC to the water sector, and what have been highlights for you during your tenure as Board member and Chairperson?

The role of the WRC has become urgent as the pressure on water resources grows and the demand for knowledge to address daily challenges increases. Our biggest achievement over the last few years has been to address this through various communication channels such as policy briefs, technical briefs, and press days. The WRC now funds a broader range of disciplines, and encourages large multi-partner research teams. There is also an emphasis on including the end-users in the ongoing research. Importantly, nearly all research projects now include student training.

The 40-year celebration of the WRC in 2011 was definitely a highlight. This brought past and present staff and water sector stakeholders together. Past contributions of the WRC were celebrated and new research directions showcased. It also provided an opportunity to bid farewell to our former CEO of ten years Dr Rivka Kfir, and to celebrate her contributions. During my tenure as Board Chair I also had the opportunity to interact with three different Water Affairs Ministers.

Parliamentary visits and the presentation of our annual reports were indeed memorable highlights. It has been rewarding to see the research portfolios grow, often with leverage funding. International achievements of our water researchers as well as the staff of the WRC were also highlights that confirmed the high quality of our water research. During my term of office the Fund Management System was implemented which has improved financial management and reporting at the WRC.

In your opinion, what are the greatest strengths of the WRC?

The fact that the WRC funds research across the water sector, issues relating to health, economy and the environment is certainly a strength. Research outputs make a difference in the lives of all people of South Africa. The research portfolio of the WRC is aligned with government's priorities and outcomes and it is thus geared to inform policy and decision-making. Collaborative partnerships with relevant stakeholders allows for effective dissemination of knowledge. Another great strength is the qualified staff. Research directors and managers are leaders in their specialist water areas, which allows for effective leadership and coordination of water research. Without their detailed knowledge and understanding this would not be possible.

What are the greatest challenges the WRC needs to face in years to come?

Adequate funding to address urgent research needs will remain a

challenge. For this reason it is important to mainstream water, which is essential for economic growth and sustainable development and ensure protection of our fragile aquatic ecosystems that provide the goods and services that we depend on. Another challenge is to ensure that there are enough researchers producing high-quality research in all the water research disciplines. There is a need for consistent and long-term funding to develop research teams.

Is the WRC still as relevant today as it was 40 years ago?

Indeed the WRC is even more relevant today than it was 40 years ago. As new challenges arise (e.g. endocrine disrupting compounds, acid mine drainage, fracking) the WRC helps to ensure that we have knowledge to address these.

I would like to thank the staff and outgoing Board members of the WRC, my association with all of you has been a great privilege. Through my academic and research activities I will continue to be associated with the WRC. As the newly-elected President of the South African Society of Aquatic Sciences I look forward to growing the society together with input from the WRC. My employer, the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University will also host a new South African Research Chair in Shallow Water Ecosystems, which will allow for collaboration on research and training. Best wishes to all and thanks so very much for the last six wonderful, rewarding years.



Barbara Schreiner

How has the role/meaningfulness of the WRC changed in the water sector since you first became involved with the Commission?

The WRC has played an important role in the water sector in South Africa since its inception, with 40 years of solid research supporting water management in the country. Obviously, however, with the changes in policy and legislation, and as the challenges facing the water sector and water users have become greater over the years, with increased pressure on our limited water resources, the research scope of the WRC and the nature of the research has had to adapt to address increasingly 'wicked' problems – ones without one simple solution. Equally, the challenges of inequity in South Africa, in access to water and in access to the benefits of the economy driven by water, mean that the WRC-funded research has had to engage with a range of complex and challenging social, developmental and institutional issues.

What do you see as some of the main impacts the WRC has had over the years?

The research funded by the WRC has provided a scientific basis for water management and regulation, and for addressing critical management, institutional, financial and ecological issues. The WRC funds a wide range of research, from the so-called hard sciences to the social sciences, a lot of which has informed decisions taken by the Department of Water Affairs in water management. The research has also informed the practice of water services authorities, and has impacted on water use in a number

of sectors across the country. Having a solid, scientific research base has enabled South Africa to understand and address specific water-related challenges in the country from an informed base and to keep at the cutting edge of water resources management with solutions that are specific to the context and needs of South Africa.

In your opinion, what are the greatest strengths of the WRC?

The WRC has a number of strengths, of which 40 years of high-quality research is definitely one. There is strong institutional memory in the organisation, with a stable, experienced and committed team of research managers. The diversity of the WRC staff is also a great strength, in terms of race, gender, culture, and disciplinary background. The current CEO is an excellent leader, with new ideas and new energy to take the WRC forward into a new era.

What are the greatest challenges the WRC needs to face in years to come?

There are several challenges that the WRC will face in the years to come. One of these is increasing the funding base in order to be able to take on a greater suite of research programmes to address the increasing challenges in the water sector and amongst water users. Another challenge is ensuring that the research results are effectively disseminated and used – not just by other researchers, but by water managers and users – this, I believe, requires a greater up-front identification of possible impact pathways and stronger engagement throughout research projects with the potential users to ensure that the research serves their needs. Contributing to and building world-class water research capacity in South Africa remains an ongoing challenge to the WRC. Finally, I think there is a major challenge in the development of appropriate technology, and making the transition from technology development to market. I think there

is a much greater role for the WRC to play in this area.

Are there any areas within the water sector that you feel the WRC should give more attention to?

One of the areas that I am particularly interested in is how one ensures that research makes a difference in the world, that it contributes to making a better world, for the poor and the marginalised in particular. As a research institution based in a developing country with high levels of poverty and major water challenges, we are in a strong position to provide cutting edge research to similar countries around the world and to learn from researchers in similar contexts.

How do you see the role of the WRC Board in achieving these goals?

Firstly, I think it is important to note that the goal of the WRC is to provide high-quality research to serve South Africa, not just the Department of Water Affairs. There are a number of government departments and agencies, and a vast range of water users, who can and should benefit from WRC funded research – across all water use sectors. While the Board clearly has a fiduciary responsibility in ensuring that the finances and resources of the WRC are used effectively and in line with legal requirements and international best practice, the Board also has a role in marketing the WRC and in making connections between the WRC and potential partners and research users. The Board also has a critical role to play in setting the strategic direction of the WRC and ensuring the performance of the WRC and of the CEO.

We are extremely fortunate to have an institution such as the WRC in South Africa, with a proud track record. The challenge now is to take it to greater heights, and to enable it to play an even stronger role in leading water research in South Africa, SADC and globally. ■

“Research directors and managers are leaders in their specialist water areas, which allows for effective leadership and co-ordination of water research.”