

The adventure of working together: Promoting transdisciplinarity between young water scientists



A national forum for young water scientists aims to bring multiple disciplines together around one goal. Shanna Nienaber and Inga Jacobs report.

The water resources of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) are highly sensitive and complex to understand, govern, use effectively and distribute fairly. This reality is created by many overlapping factors, among others the fact that water is fundamentally a shared resource in the region.

Some of the most economically developed southern African

states have limited water resources, which may constrain future economic development. This makes it imperative to work carefully with this resource to ensure its continued availability, at an affordable price, to existing and future generations. In addition, there are pronounced developmental differences in SADC, rendering some countries more effective than others at mobilising necessary human, financial and technologies resources to address water scarcity and related human welfare needs. Finally, SADC is confronted by numerous social challenges, such as population growth, urbanisation, climate change, refugee movements,

and outbreaks of disease which impact on water needs and use.

TOWARDS A TRANS-DISCIPLINARY RESPONSE

Traditionally, the technical and scientific communities have been called on to respond to the concerns of the water sector. This had led to much technical and scientific innovation to respond to water challenges. However, emerging water concerns and complexities are demanding more integrated levels of ingenuity and expertise from a diverse set of backgrounds. No amount of technical and scientific

ingenuity is adequate if the solutions generated are not relevant, digestible and acceptable to the specific socio-political and socio-economic contexts of our time.

Given this realisation, there is growing recognition of the need for more transdisciplinary responses to the challenges facing the water sector. Transdisciplinarity is about rising to the challenge of working together; understanding the concepts, contributions and language of different disciplines; and integrating the perspectives of different actors into comprehensive solutions for the water sector.

One of the hindering factors to transdisciplinarity is the reality that there is an ongoing lack of social scientists dealing with water issues. This can be, at least in part, attributed to university curricula that do not adequately equip social science students with the skills needed to grapple with environmental issues; funding agendas that tend to favour natural science methodology and thus support less social science research; and an organisational bias favouring natural scientists and technical experts in research organisations. This is tied to the (mis)perception that 'hard science' is more accurate and valuable than the 'soft' and often qualitative science of social scientists.

Despite these challenges, there is growing recognition of the need for social scientists equipped with skills, understanding and passion for governance issues in the water sector. A social science presence is important as social scientists have unique expertise in cultural, behavioural and societal realities. This equips them with the skills to interpret subjective, objective, inter-subjective and structural aspects of society. This aids understanding of the social developments, needs and drawbacks of a context. Also, social science has a familiarity with institutional capacity building mechanisms and thus can offer critical support to the bodies and individuals that are mandated to manage water in

the region. Furthermore, a primary goal of social science is to influence public policy by general practical knowledge that can help policy-makers make informed decisions and in so doing help to foster more effective policy and governance options.

YOUNG SCHOLARS FORUM

Given the complexity of the challenges facing the water sector in SADC and the obvious value of transdisciplinarity in responding to these issues; it is essential to rise to this challenge.

The Young Scholars Forum (YSF) in Transboundary Water Governance is funded by the Water Research Commission, and aims to incentivise transdisciplinarity in the water sector. The WRC's commitment to funding this initiative is a clear indication of the growing recognition, by institutions in the water sector, of the need to build capacity in transdisciplinarity in order to foster a sector that is equipped to respond to the challenges of water management and governance.

YSF's mission is to facilitate collaborative exchange between young water professionals and students around issues facing the water sector. Conscious effort is made to accommodate multiple voices, facilitate understanding of the language and perspectives of different disciplines, and to nurture the presence of minority voices in the water sector such as social scientists.

The specific aims of the YSF are to build a community and network of professionals who have an interest in dealing with the social dimensions of water challenges in our region, to create opportunities for younger and more experienced professionals to interact and share knowledge, and to increase social science literature output relating to water issues.

This forum is unique in that it is focused on the specific issue of water governance. It is theme-based, allowing young professionals to develop their expertise in a focused, proactive

manner. It is transdisciplinary, and has strong links with the South African Young Water Professionals (YWP), which provides linkages and access to a wider national and global water network with the Water Institute of Southern Africa and the International Water Association.

ACTIVITIES

To date YSF has been involved in a number of initiatives to promote its mission and aims, including three events held in collaboration with the YWP Gauteng Chapter as well as other events held in Pretoria and Durban.

In November the YSF will host a workshop in transdisciplinarity at the CSIR, in Pretoria. The theme of this event is 'Exploring transdisciplinarity to address change in the SADC water sector: establishing the role of social scientists in the vision.'

To overcome the challenges of the SADC water sector, it is essential to come to grips with working across disciplines, across boundaries, and with a diverse spectrum of actors. Young water professionals are strategically placed to respond to this unique challenge. YSF is a constructive way to help promote transdisciplinarity, and to groom, recruit and mentor young professionals who are moving into the sector. This ultimately assists in paving the way for more effective, impactful and relevant solutions for the SADC water sector. □

Dr Inga Jacobs of the CSIR speaks to a group of young water professionals at an event organised by the Young Scholars Forum in collaboration with the Young Water Professionals Gauteng Chapter.

