



MINA GULI

FOUNDER AND CEO OF THIRST FOUNDATION

 OLIVIA TEMPEST

“Tackling the water crisis is central to achieving all the Sustainable Development Goals”

Thirst Foundation, founded by Mina Guli in 2012, is a non-profit organization dedicated to implementing innovative initiatives for water-related action.

The first thing that struck me when speaking to Mina Guli, Founder and CEO of Thirst Foundation, for this interview, was the positive light she shone on the current water crisis. While acknowledging there is still a lot to do, she also emphasised the many possible solutions that already exist and are being implemented worldwide. She has heard of these first-hand as she has travelled around the world running more than 200 marathons in order to bring attention to this global issue. Passionate about advocating for water protection, Guli is also a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader and one of Fortune Magazine’s 50 greatest leaders in the world.

Can you tell us briefly about your career path and your current role?

Following a successful 15-year career in law, finance and climate change, I woke up to water: I realized there was a global water crisis and that it was largely invisible. Not to the people living on the frontline of the crisis, but it wasn’t on the TV news or on the front page of newspapers. Nor was it on the list of priorities for people in the corridors of political,

corporate or financial power. This had to change if we were ever going to tackle the crisis. Water doesn’t come from a tap, it comes from rivers, wetlands and lakes; we need to protect and maintain these water resources not just for ourselves, but also for future generations.

So I set out to make a difference by doing something different – running crazy distances to raise awareness and inspire action. Since then, I have spoken to countless people on the frontlines of the water crisis and each person reinforces the need for me to do what I can to share their stories with decision makers in politics and business, amplify their demands for action and drive transformational change.

As a water advocate and ultra-runner, I’m committed to doing whatever I can to make a difference in the world – like running 200 marathons in one year for water as part of our Run Blue campaign. And it did make a difference – raising awareness, driving action and building the biggest global grassroots movement on water in history, with people from 202 countries and territories stepping up for water as part of our global runs. But there is much more to do...

The Run Blue campaign ran for a year leading up to the UN 2023 Water Conference that took place in March 2023. What were your thoughts on the outcome of the event? What would you like to see happen next?

The UN Water Conference was a landmark moment. It shone a bright spotlight on the world’s worsening water crisis – and showed that water is central to everything. And it built unprecedented momentum for action. Some people have focused on the insufficient commitments – and it’s true that the pledges made by governments and businesses were not enough to tackle the water crisis – but they are missing the bigger picture.

There had not been a global water conference for almost 50 years – longer than most people on Earth have been alive. It brought together governments, businesses, financial institutions, civil society, representatives of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, women and youth – all to talk about their water challenges and how those were undermining their food and energy security, their livelihoods, and the global efforts to tackle the climate and nature crises. And it made a very loud and clear call to accelerate action.

That is what needs to happen next – the world needs to urgently and drastically scale up action on water. We need governments and businesses to fulfil the commitments they made in New York – and we need more of them to make pledges and then take the steps to achieve real change.

Critically, the world needs to invest in protecting and restoring healthy fresh-

“As a water advocate and ultra-runner, I’m committed to doing whatever I can to make a difference, like running 200 marathons in one year”



water ecosystems – particularly rivers. For far too long, decision makers have treated rivers as pipes, prioritising only the water that flows down them – not all the other diverse benefits of healthy rivers that are critical for the health of people and planet. We cannot solve the world’s water crisis without building more resilient river basins – and we can only do that if governments, businesses and communities work together. And if people are aware of the importance of healthy rivers – how they underpin societies and economies.

"The reality is there is no lack of solutions across the world - but there is a lack of awareness of the scale and urgency of the water crisis"

The UN Water Conference created real momentum – around water management and infrastructure but also around protecting, restoring and sustainably managing our rivers and other freshwater ecosystems. We need to turn this momentum into action – so keep your eyes peeled for the next phase of Run Blue.

What are some successful examples of partnerships between governments, NGOs, and the private sector that have led to significant improvements in water and sanitation, aligned with SDG 6?

There are lots of positive efforts to showcase and scale up - and that is another aim of our Run Blue campaign: to raise awareness not just about water challenges but also highlight solutions.

I have met entrepreneurs and scientists who are creating innovative crops to better cope with drought, water experts and conservationists who are helping to protect and restore rivers, lakes

and wetlands. I’ve met young people determined to act and make a difference. And politicians and business leaders who are prioritizing water.

I’ve seen communities come together to set up systems that encourage each other to be proud of their newfound access to water and are part of the process from installation to repairs so their sense of pride in their water system means that they self-sustain and ensure it is up and running and are held accountable. The sense of ownership means that they take much better care of the mechanisms and have the know-how and contacts needed in case there are any issues that need to be fixed.

The reality is there is no lack of solutions across the world - but there is a lack of awareness of the scale and urgency of the crisis and a lack of will to take the steps necessary to implement, replicate and scale up the solutions.

What innovations did you encounter on your Run Blue journey?

There are so many innovations – from more efficient irrigation to innovations in crops themselves, from Nature-based Solutions to new water tech start-ups and innovative finance. Innovations are the least of our problems. What we need is action – and that includes investing in innovations that will make a sustainable difference, but it also means investing in the hard – but less exciting and more traditional – work of improving governance and water management. And it means doing what might sound innovative to many people – investing in nature, in protecting and restoring our rivers, lakes, wetlands and aquifers.

How can education and awareness campaigns for water action contribute to achieving SDG 6 targets and foster a culture of sustainability?

Awareness is the first step to action. Everyone knows how important water is, especially the billions of people on the



Another aim of our Run Blue campaign is to raise awareness not just about water challenges but also highlight possible solutions



frontlines of the water crisis. But most decision makers are still blinded when it comes to water. They do not seem to grasp that tackling the water crisis – too little, too much and too dirty – is not just about SDG6 but is central to achieving all the Sustainable Development Goals. In particular, they do not seem

to see that the ongoing degradation of our rivers, lakes and wetlands is at the heart of the water crisis and investing in healthy freshwater ecosystems is central to driving change. This is why I run. And talk at major fora. And meet political and business leaders week after week. To open their eyes to water risks and solu-

tions – to share stories of people on the frontlines of the water crisis so they are inspired to take the hard steps needed to tackle the water crisis.

Getting companies and individuals to join one of your campaigns is just the beginning. How do you keep them engaged and supporting water action in the long run?

We keep them engaged by:

- ★ Showcasing the problem and highlighting solutions: Stories that inspire and connect.
- ★ Raising global awareness (3.5 billion media impressions with coverage in major news outlets) and asking people to join our movement: we built the biggest global grassroots movement on water in history.
- ★ Convening events with business, community and government leaders.
- ★ Delivering real change: Companies committing to real, measurable change in supply chains that directly and indirectly represent 20% of global water use.

