





“THE LOOMING WATER CRISIS MAY BE HUMANITY’S MOST UNDERRATED CHALLENGE”

Henrika Thomasson, Director of Communications, Stockholm International Water Institute

Henrika Thomasson, Director of Communications at SIWI, tells us about the challenges of communicating about their work: providing advice, raising awareness, and driving collaboration between different actors to strengthen water governance, often behind the scenes.

CRISTINA NOVO

How do you think communication in the water sector has evolved in recent years?

I think the topic of water suffers from too many voices advocating their own sub-cause without being able to unify as one. Water has all the characteristics to make it the next big sustainability topic, but to get there, we need an engaging, simple, and unifying call to action. The sector is beginning to realise this now and we see more and more willingness to join forces.

Why do you think it is important to communicate about water?

The looming water crisis may be humanity’s most underrated challenge. Water stress is a rapidly growing problem in many parts of the world with dangerous consequences for humans and ecosystems. We simply cannot continue to use water as unsustainably as we do, but the awareness of this is low among the general pu-

blic and, consequently, so is the will to solve the problem. Paradoxically, water is also a solution to a number of major threats to the planet and humankind. If we would apply a water lens to critical challenges such as pandemics, climate change, food production, industrial manufacturing, and regional conflicts, we would find a number of cost-effective solutions. Follow the water!

What are the most challenging aspects of communicating about SIWI’s work?

That we so often work behind the scenes and can’t talk about, or claim credit for the results, is the most challenging aspect! SIWI is as an advisor to governments, cities, and companies in strengthening their policies on water’s use and management. A lot of our work relates to raising knowledge and awareness among decision-makers, as well as making different groups of stakeholders talk to each other and collaborate. We do this through

research, workshops, training and the development of practical guidelines and tools, where communication is a very important and integrated part of the delivery.

Could you highlight one of your organization’s communication success stories?

In January 2019, SIWI and the SDG Academy launched the United Nations’ official Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on SDG 6. Almost 6,000 students from over 160 countries enrolled, making it one of the most popular courses ever within the SDG Academy. The MOOC consists of nine sessions presented by leading names from a range of thought-leading organizations. Topics include: Water and the SDGs; climate change; water and ecosystems; water governance, water and sanitation; transboundary water; food and water, and water and energy. The MOOC is still running and continues to attract new students.

Who or what organization inspires you when it comes to ways of communicating?

Powerful communication is emotional. It is only when we are touched that we will connect with a message and change our behaviour, but people tend to think that information alone will do the trick. Which it won’t. One of many examples that demonstrate how emotionally charged campaigns are much more impactful is the 2012 Dumb Ways to Die campaign from the Metro Trains in Melbourne, Australia, promoting railway safety. It was bold in terms of provocation, with a catchy song and a game that caught on. And it contributed to a 30% reduction in near-miss accidents.

A more recent, inspiring example is Bobi Wine, the Ugandan musician/politician, and his song Corona Virus Alert. The song contains a message on individual behavioural change. Bobi Wine also calls on African governments to improve public healthcare systems.