



**A UN-Water Development Corner Session on
“Sharing social tools
Building a water operators’ community of practice”**

**IWA World Water Congress, Montreal, Canada
21 September**



The UN-Water session in the development corner at the IWA World Water Congress heard how social tools, such as communication and awareness-raising efforts, can play a central role to play in changing behavior and raising awareness on water and sanitation issues.

During the first part of the session, three water operators from three different regions of the world (Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and Africa) presented their communication and awareness-raising initiatives.

Josefina Maestu, Coordinator of the UN-Water Decade Programme on Advocacy and Communication (UNW-DPAC), introduced the session by highlighting the benefits of water operators’ information and communication efforts, not only in their capacity to bring about change in users’ habits, but also in their benefits to operators themselves as they provide the operator with performance feedback and increase customer satisfaction, thereby reducing complaints and increasing trust. Ms. Maestu then introduced the main purpose of the session which was to facilitate a process of experience sharing and reflect on existing communication and awareness-raising practices and their effectiveness. She then presented the representatives of three water operators, who briefly described their ongoing communication and awareness-raising initiatives.

Andries Motsele, of South African bulk water supplier Rand Water, shared his company's WaterWise initiative, a communication and awareness-raising exercise that is successfully achieving positive behaviour change by carefully crafting its messages and means of communication to its target audiences, like populations with high rates of illiteracy (addressed by using talking books)



or low-income school children (who learned about water by interacting with a soccer ball). He especially raised the issue of measuring the impacts of communication efforts and provided an example where, following a communication campaign, water consumption fell by 4.5%. He also presented Rand Water's strategy to serve poor populations and indicated that the municipalities determine who is considered too poor to pay.



Long Naro, of the Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority (PPWSA), which just received the 2010 Stockholm Industry Water Award, presented on the extraordinary service improvements the PPWSA has achieved since efforts began in 1993: significantly reduced leakages (from 72% to 6% today) and an increased customer base and collection ratio, both of which have doubled. He pointed out how

communication and awareness campaigns have been essential for increasing willingness to pay and reducing customer complaints, noting how transparency is important to achieve this. He also reported that a survey just completed has revealed a huge reluctance on the part of those now supplied to actually drink raw tap water: less than 10% drink water straight from the tap, many preferring to boil it before consumption, a practice that is not only unnecessary, but both energy intensive and costly, particularly for the urban poor. The utility has now launched a campaign to make customers aware of the safety of tap water. In this effort, proximity and regular meetings are proving crucial to achieving the community engagement.



Ana Cristina Navarro, of the Colombian utility Empresas Públicas de Medellín (EPM) presented the case of EPM, which provides energy, gas and water services to the population. EPM is today the 2nd largest water company in Colombia, with 1,000,000 connections in 23 municipalities; the company is today a 100% city owned company. Their slogan is “We are there”, which means that the company is there to improve the citizen’s quality of life. Ms. Navarro presented their main communication efforts, mainly aimed at teaching people to use resources rationally. She described a

number of innovative approaches to community engagement. These include:

- A programme in which, each week, 50 families are provided with a fun yet educational day-out during which the whole family will be given a sense of the importance and value of water
- A TV show which features neighborhood efforts and a daily Radio programme which engages local reporters (e.g. housewives)
- A communication campaign to reduce water leakages (“Every drop of potable water lost, hurts us”), which had a very high level of recall.

After the dialogue, participants were given the opportunity to raise their concerns. Participants were especially interested by the following:

- They wanted to know if there is a competition with alternative messages. Water operators indicated that, more than competing with alternative messages, they are confronted with ignorance and illegality (e.g. non-accounted water).
- The main challenges related to measuring the effectiveness of the campaigns. Water operators indicated that it takes a lot of time to measure the real impact of some campaigns (e.g. those related to behaviour changes).





During the second part of the session (from 13:00 to 14:00), the **Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance (GWOPA)** presented their social networking mechanism which allows water companies, as well as individual water professionals, to share experiences and lessons learned. This presentation was then followed by a debate with the audience that ended with a 'marketplace' exercise where water operators shared some of the communications materials and initiatives developed with interested organizations and potential partners.

The session concluded that it is even possible to communicate in societies with low levels of literacy and that it is important to get the citizens as agents leading the communication process.