

Making a splash

SPLASH

Miriam Feilberg outlines the work of the SPLASH initiative, which exemplifies smart research management by promoting knowledge and resource sharing in the search to alleviate water poverty and improve sanitation – exploiting synergies in a multitude of research projects across much of the world



To begin, could you describe the overall aims and objectives of the SPLASH project?

SPLASH is ERA-Net funded by the Sixth Framework Programme (FP6). This means that the overall objectives are to coordinate research and develop joint activities. SPLASH

has a double function because it is also the Research Component of the European Union Water Initiative (EUWI) which promotes and supports better management of water for partner countries in four regions: Africa, Latin America, the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe, and Central Asia.

How would you rate the current state of knowledge sharing and collaboration between programmes within the context of water and sanitation research?

At present there is not a sufficient level of knowledge-sharing taking place in water and sanitation research. For instance, during our coordination workshop in Ethiopia we observed some duplication of research – perhaps not whole projects, but components – and learned that some researchers from EU countries had projects on the same topics, like groundwater, and could have benefited from increasing cooperation at an earlier stage in the project.

The other issue is that the subjects of water and development tend to fall between two

chairs in the EU research and coordination system, where you have water research in one group and development and cooperation with developing countries in another group. SPLASH can contribute to linking water and development researchers and facilitate North/South knowledge sharing.

Could you provide an example of how SPLASH reaches out to existing programmes to ensure good coordination and management practice?

First and foremost SPLASH has developed a number of tools to enable better coordination among water-for-development research projects. On our website you will find searchable online databases on SPLASH partner-funded programmes which you can search by existing donor programmes, recipient countries and major themes. The results give an outline of each programme or country where coordinated research activities are carried out.

We have also produced the Water for Development Yellow Pages, which is a country-based overview of online resources for development-related water research, where you can search by research institutes, projects, programmes and information portals.

Streamlining the search for safe water

Based on this information we have held research coordination workshops in specific basins and countries enabling partners to share knowledge on research activities to avoid duplication and to learn from each others' activities. This has taken place in Ethiopia, the Mekong Basin and the Niger Basin.

What type of work is supported through the SPLASH sanitation research programme and what do you hope to achieve through this programme?

One of our objectives was to develop jointly-funded research activities and to fulfil this we had rounds of discussions within our Scientific Advisory Council, which gave guidance for selection of this topic. The overall reason for selecting this topic is that the Millennium Development Goal for sanitation is lagging far behind the water goal and extra efforts are really needed if we want to achieve this target.

In short, we want to contribute to meeting goals on sanitation by contributing to improvement of the knowledge base. We have found that some of the largest problems are in urban areas and they are not so much linked to technical solutions, but to securing integrated sustainable systems for sanitation.

We also want to try out and demonstrate some of the findings from our project with regard to research management such as, how to secure sustainable partnerships and equity in North-South cooperation, how to reach out for policy and practice and disseminate findings to stakeholders.

Are there any particular successes from the project thus far that you would like to highlight?

Based on the lessons learned we are also implementing an open, online course on research management, which has been identified through our activities as an aspect that is often not covered in the education of researchers. Young researchers are taught the technical content of their studies, but often do not learn how to manage research. This makes it difficult to apply for projects, take the lead in larger research projects and to be partners in equal partnerships. So far, the coordination workshop has given good value for money. Furthermore, the joint call on sanitation with five funded research projects is additionally being implemented now with good success.

By encouraging and enabling knowledge sharing and pooling of valuable resources for research into improvements, the **SPLASH** project has bridged gaps between nations and communities where clean water is scarce and sanitation is poor. As a result, collaboration has been significantly improved across national boundaries

DUE TO A LACK of access to safe water and adequate sanitation, citizens of many nations are still at risk of disease and ill health. The simple fact that access to clean water resources is restricted can impact individuals in detrimental ways, as the European Union Water Initiative (EUWI) points out: "There are millions with no choice but to waste whole days of work or school just to fetch water from remote locations. And the numbers of those forced to emigrate by drought and climate change climb every year". Within this environment of desperation and need, the EUWI Research Area Network SPLASH project offers hope for improving these situations of deprivation, by working to hasten and optimise the work of researchers in the area of water access and distribution.

With an aim to support those most in need, the SPLASH project works toward enabling developing nations to actively support vulnerable people. Miriam Feilberg, the SPLASH Project Manager, elucidates: "Through the combination of national research programmes, more ambitious activities can be tackled than are possible when programmes are working independently of each other". While achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is a driving force behind the project, the scope allows participants to foresee the empowerment of the water research community through a growing alliance. SPLASH is working towards making the ideal of the European Research Area an actuality by bringing

together research collaborator programmes from across Europe, harmonised into a coherent working model. The project focuses on the whole of Africa, as well as parts of Europe, the Mekong region and areas in South America, and seeks to both coordinate existing programmes of water management and ensure that water research programmes address the highest priority needs.

GOING WITH THE FLOW OF IDEAS

SPLASH has enjoyed a close working partnership with the EUWI and, as a result of this partnership, has developed good relationships with policy makers and significantly increased attention on the problems of water sourcing and management.

The SPLASH project represents a collaboration of 11 European countries, and consists of a consortium of 16 departments, comprising of funding organisations and national research and technological development authorities: "This is an international agreement to which over 100 ministers, heads of agencies and other senior officials subscribed," explains Feilberg, and it has produced real commitment. "They are committing their countries and organisations to continue to increase efforts in harmonisation, alignment and managing aid for results by monitoring actions and indicators," she enthuses.

The consortium is concerned that research is not undertaken in isolation at the expense of

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INTELLIGENCE

SPLASH

COORDINATING EUROPEAN WATER RESEARCH FOR POVERTY REDUCTION

OBJECTIVES

To coordinate and combine national research programmes for the improvement of European water research for poverty reduction. The project focuses on Africa and the Mekong region.

PARTNERS

Austrian Development Cooperation, Austria • Federal Institute for Geosciences and Natural Resources, Germany • Euro-Mediterranean Center for Climate Change, Italy • Department for International Development, UK • Directorate General for Development Cooperation, Belgium • German Development Institute, Germany • Danish Water Forum, Denmark • Italian Ministry for Environment and Territory, Italy • Institute of Research for Development, France • Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, France • Ministry of the Environment of the Czech Republic • National Environment Research Council, UK • Norwegian Water Resources and Energy Directorate, Norway • Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Switzerland • The Finnish Environment Institute, Finland • Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

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CONTACT

Miriam Feilberg
Network Coordinator

Danish Water Forum
Agern Allé 5
DK-2970 Hørsholm
Denmark

T +45 4516 9200
E mfe@dhiigroup.com

www.splash-era.net

MIRIAM FEILBERG is employed by DHI and works as Network Coordinator for the Danish Water Forum, a stakeholder organisation in the Danish water sector. Feilberg has broad experience in project management, organisational and institutional analysis, stakeholder participation, network building and conducting international workshops and conferences.



valuable time, resources and funds, and that through pooling expertise and initiative, SPLASH can set a benchmark from which a plethora of other, diverse projects may benefit. It has had positive side effects for the participants in terms of sharing knowledge and ideas, as Feilberg sets out: "I know that it has been valued by members of various bodies to be able to participate in the meetings, discuss challenges of mutual interest and share knowledge on activities. For a number of the participants it has had a value in itself to participate in these bodies".

AGAINST THE TIDE OF POVERTY

SPLASH have produced a common vision and objectives which it shares with the public, policy makers, and other researchers by means of targeted dissemination, as Feilberg outlines: "We introduced a Work Package responsible for dissemination as it is very important that findings and lessons learned are shared worldwide among researchers and stakeholders with an interest in water and development". She clarifies: "This year – our final year with this funding mechanism – we are doing a lot to share the lessons that we have learned with partners and stakeholders". In particular, there is a project website and a newsletter and project workers participate in conferences, such as Stockholm Water Week. The website offers a wealth of information in the form of fact sheets and policy briefs and is open to all.

Feilberg speculates about the threat of environmental changes in the forms of global warming. Asked whether she interprets the increase in droughts in recent years as due to changes in weather patterns or a lack of coordinated efforts to bring water to those who need it, she is certain that both are factors: "We see water and climatic changes and they contribute to increase of droughts and lack of water, especially for poor communities, but we also see poor management". She asserts: "This is not so much a contributing factor for drought in itself, but for poor water supply, even when there is water". It is imperative, Feilberg argues, to "separate poor water supply and coverage from water scarcity. There is

a clear distinction between economic and physical water scarcity".

FURTHER DOWNSTREAM

Feilberg reflects on the future possibilities of the project: "Our funding is running out, but we hope to be able to gain funding for the next two years from the EUWI as an element in their new thematic strategy, where it is now envisaged that SPLASH will be transferred into a Knowledge Management Working Group". The proposal is for the group to provide support to countries and regions in developing policies and strategies for research and knowledge organisation in close cooperation with the regions, leading institutions and networks in Member States, while enabling the division of labour and enhanced coordination between associate state funders and, institutions such as the future JPI on Water Challenges and thematic or regional ERA-Nets. As Feilberg explains, "SPLASH will facilitate information sharing between Member States and their relevant organisations with networks and organisations in partner countries and link up strong research groups and other networks".

While SPLASH works towards its current goals, Feilberg iterates that the immediate challenge is to secure funding for coordination activities beyond the end of this year: "We are aiming to secure some basic funds for the secretariat, which is quite a challenge. Finding funds for actual activities has proven less difficult".

In terms of the successes of the project thus far, Feilberg reflects: "There is a tendency in the water sector to focus negatively on what we are not able to do, what has been tried and did not work", she says. "I think I would rather see a lot more sharing and learning from good examples". While accepting that there are always cultural differences at play in any international cooperative venture, Feilberg nevertheless affirms the value of multiculturalism in finding solutions to the problems of water: "We can learn from each other if we remember to adapt actual solutions to our settings," she concludes.

