

Entrepreneurship in water, sanitation and resource management

MANY ENTREPRENEURIAL YOUNG WATER PROFESSIONALS ARE CHOOSING TO BECOME INDEPENDENT AND ESTABLISH THEIR OWN BUSINESSES IN THE INTERNATIONAL WATER, SANITATION AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT SECTOR. KARLA SCHLIE, THE INITIATOR AND A FOUNDER MEMBER OF THE SWISS TOILET ORGANISATION, SHARES HER EXPERIENCE AS A TRAINEE IN THE CEWAS START-UP PROGRAMME.

Imagine yourself as a young entrepreneur sitting in a spacious office, concentrating on designing a business plan and being coached by renowned experts in water and sanitation, while enjoying the relaxed atmosphere of a typical and picturesque small Swiss town. That is exactly what participating in the cewas Start-Up programme is like: simply awesome!

cewas – the international centre for water management services – is a Swiss non-profit organisation that represents business competence in water, sanitation and resource management. The cewas Start-Up programme empowers young people to put water and sanitation-related business ideas into practice by combining professional training, coaching, networking and consulting. Over a period of about four months, enthusiastic young water professionals from different parts of the world come together to receive intensive training, exchange experiences and support each other in the process of developing their own businesses.

Some inspiring start-ups have emerged from the cewas headquarters, such as: Wasser für Wasser, an NGO dedicated to funding water projects in the south with innovative finance mechanisms; Aquasis Solutions, which offers professional assistance in water accounting and industrial water use optimisation; and Aquawise Consulting, which is focused on water and sanitation safety plans. The third batch of young water professionals trained at cewas saw an interesting development for the centre itself, with some of the trainees working on transferring the successful cewas Start-Up programme to South Asia, the Middle East and South Africa.



The cewas Start-Up programme helps young water professionals set up their own businesses. Credit: cewas.

Sanitation issues: not unique to developing countries

Although business opportunities in the sanitation sector will not come knocking on your door in places like Switzerland, a thorough look around reveals that there is still plenty of work to be done. With this approach, a start-up called the Swiss Toilet Organisation (STO) emerged from the third cewas batch in December 2013. The founding of this organisation was motivated by the growing number of national toilet organisations created in different countries around the world to deal with their respective sanitation issues, and to cooperate in solving the global sanitation crisis.

Geographic and demographic statistics indicate that 100% of the population in Switzerland has access to improved sanitation facilities in urban as well as in rural areas. So what are the issues in Switzerland? To start with, quantity does not necessarily mean quality, and 100% coverage does not mean there is a toilet waiting for you wherever you go. The figures refer mainly to the fact that all inhabitants have toilets installed in their homes and places of work, but when it comes to public places there is not always a guarantee of an accessible toilet, especially in small towns or remote recreational areas.

Beyond coverage there are other problematic issues that need to be addressed, such as open urination, which often occurs in underground passages or on the streets near bars and clubs, predominantly over the weekend. Another problem is the abusive use of public toilets and vandalism, which leads to their closure, affecting other citizens who use these facilities.

Challenges and expectations

STO was created to improve the sanitation culture in Switzerland and to promote the use of sustainable sanitation technologies there. The examples mentioned above are just some of the problems in the field of sanitation in Switzerland, and they are typical of industrial countries. Therefore, awareness-raising will be a substantial part of the work planned by STO, targeting young people in particular, who are the future decision makers and have grown up at a time when environmental protection and care for future generations have been the subjects of discussion in society.

Further projected STO activities include developing materials for schools, workshops, conferences and toilet-share concepts, among others. In addition, the association is looking to cooperate with other toilet organisations and to support the work of institutions that are trying to alleviate the global sanitation crisis.

Being a recently established association, STO looks optimistically to the future and is eager to make a difference in Switzerland when it comes to toilets. The vision is to make Switzerland a world leader in the use of sustainable sanitation technologies; a country in which visitors and commuters have access to adequate public toilets even in remote places, and where young people are encouraged to break the taboo and look at sanitation from a different perspective.

For more information about the Swiss Toilet Organisation or the cewas Start-Up programme, visit: www.swisstoleitorganisation.ch and www.cewas.org or contact: Karla Schlie on +41 78 899 5024.