


Nov 04, 2016 by **Naomi Leight-Give'on**

Water Vulnerability: A Challenge for Public Diplomacy ^[1]

With so many global challenges, where can the biggest impact be made on global publics? How can the case for public diplomacy be made more effectively to governments, corporations, NGOs and individuals? We can start by tackling the most pressing global issue—water. Water is essential for human life and although we are a blue planet, water is a scarce resource. More than one billion people do not have access to safe water. If a core concept for public diplomacy is to increase understanding between nations by addressing issues that affect publics, then water should be at the forefront of foreign policy.

There are dozens, if not hundreds, of actors tackling global water challenges—from governments to NGOs, from multinational institutions to foundations, and from charities to corporations. Many regions are suffering from crises and conflicts over water. In many areas water rights are being disputed. In even more areas, programs and projects are being developed and implemented to give communities access to safe water. With so many players and issues, how and where can public diplomats play a role? How can public diplomacy become the go-to tool for water diplomacy practitioners from all sectors of society?

The USC Center on Public Diplomacy, through our Water Diplomacy Initiative, seeks to answer these questions. Since water is such an enormous and important issue, we have chosen to focus on a specific aspect of water diplomacy that is often overlooked—vulnerability. In this context, vulnerability can be defined as “the interface between exposure to the physical threats to human well-being and the capacity of people and communities to cope with those threats” (UNEP 2002 ). Vulnerable populations—those not yet in crisis or conflict—are often overlooked because of more pressing issues such as violent conflict, water rights disputes between governments or starvation due to drought. Public diplomacy must, however, be conducted in vulnerable areas in order to protect the people there from even greater water-related problems.

CPD's Water Diplomacy Initiative has identified four regional areas, which we will introduce in upcoming posts, to study and suggest best practices for water diplomacy practitioners. Each area has its own set of water challenges: poor water management, water scarcity, water rights and shortages, damming and limited access to clean drinking water. Each of the water issues in these regions negatively impacts cross-border populations and contributes to rising tensions between publics. And if these issues in these vulnerable areas are not confronted in a timely manner, then the consequences can be dire.

The USC Center on Public Diplomacy's goal is to address various pressing issues such as these through the Water Diplomacy Initiative. Our research will raise awareness about water issues in vulnerable populations. CPD's February 27, 2012 conference, Water Diplomacy: A Foreign Policy Imperative will provide a platform for discussion between various actors tackling water issues and gather best practices for water diplomacy. Here at USC, we hope to

make the case for public diplomacy as a key tool to solving problems that affect every person around the globe.
