



Linda Strande takes over as Head of the Sandec Department

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Topics: Organisation & Staff

The mission of Eawag's Sandec department is to find global solutions for safe sanitation, solid waste management and clean drinking water. Since September, it has been headed by Linda Strande, who has been a group leader in the department for the last 14 years. She succeeds Christoph Lüthi, who is devoting himself to new projects at Eawag.

Linda Strande took over as Head of the Eawag Department of Sanitation, Water and Solid Waste for Development (Sandec) in September and can look back on several decades of experience in the field of non-sewered sanitation and fecal sludge management. "My focus has always been on human and environmental health," she says. Sandec's research contributes directly to improving public health, be it drinking water supply in rural areas, solid waste management or fecal sludge management in densely populated areas without sewers. "In our research, you can't sit at your desk and just apply what you learned in class. You have to experience and understand the local context," explains Strande, who also teaches at ETH. Questions about business models and socio-economic factors play as important a role as the treatment technology. There is no single solution that fits everything.

Global solutions – including for Switzerland

One focus that is also reflected in Sandec's projects is that solutions and technologies from the Global South are also becoming increasingly relevant for Switzerland. The flood events in Switzerland this spring clearly demonstrated this. For example, several wastewater treatment plants in Valais were flushed out and filled with mud and gravel, and the population was then asked not to flush their toilet paper down the drain or cook with oil. In the case of another project, a vermifiltration system is treating the wastewater of 100 residents in an apartment building in Geneva. While in a different project, pit

latrines are being upgraded in a Maiensäss holiday home in the Alps.

Since living in Switzerland, Linda has regularly been drawn to the Graubünden mountains and particularly enjoys talking to the locals. At a cheese dairy in Graubünden, for example, she discovered that even a cheesemaker is not allowed to put whey from cheese production into the sewer; instead, it must be transported away by truck. "They have to find ways to recover resources," says Strande. The same issue concerns many urban regions in sub-Saharan Africa without access to sewers: what happens to wastewater that is stored on site? Who collects it? Where is that wastewater treated, and how can it be utilised? This clearly illustrates the fact that there is no need for specific solutions just for Switzerland or just the Global South – only global solutions in the corresponding local context, which ultimately benefit everyone.

Correct language can drive research forward

Not only is the local context important for Strande, but also the appropriate terminology so that research results can be incorporated into practice and "everyone is on the same page". This is currently still lacking in the dialogue surrounding non-sewered wastewater and faecal sludge management. Only when clearly defined terms are established can research and knowledge be aligned, compared and advanced globally.

Certain terminologies that have become established in the dialogue around non-sewered sanitation in the Global South are also outdated. Faecal sludge is only used to refer to sanitation in the context of low-income areas in the Global South, not for example for the common use of septic tanks in the USA, or on-site treatment units in Japan, although it is the same principle. The words we choose to use matter. "To address this, we have set up a working group at Sandec to tackle precisely these issues in the future," says Strande.

Building bridges for global cooperation

However, Strande sees the department as more than just a linguistic bridge builder. Sandec is frequently in direct contact with practitioners, NGOs and governments. Sharing knowledge is one of Sandec's core tasks. "Our online courses will continue to be expanded in the future for the support and training of practitioner," explains Strande. By incorporating these research areas in a single department, Sandec can effectively address research needs relevant to water, sanitation and solid waste in low- and middle-income countries. The basis of which is interdisciplinary cooperation throughout Eawag. In view of the rapidly changing world – both technologically and in the context of climate change – it is also important to her to ensure that Sandec's research remains globally relevant and, above all, makes a difference for people and the environment.

Profile

Linda Strande, who completed her bachelor's degree in mathematics at the University of Washington, soon turned her attention to the environment. After completing her PhD in Civil and Environmental Engineering, also in Seattle, Washington, she took up her position as group leader of MEWS (Management of Excreta, Wastewater and Sludge) at Eawag in July 2010. Since 1 September, she has been Head of the Sandec Department.

Cover picture: On 1 September 2024, Linda Strande took up her new position as Head of Department at Sandec (Photo: Eawag, Peter Penicka).

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