

connexions interview with **SONJA VARTIALA**

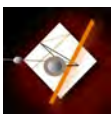
Transcript of the interview with Sonja Vartiala, executive director of Finnwatch, Finland.

The interview was recorded for issue 4(1). It was conducted by Han Yu, via Skype, on February 9, 2016. The interview was transcribed from the recorded interview by Han Yu, *connexions'* section editor.

The video recording of this interview is available on the *connexions'* Vimeo channel at <https://vimeo.com/166975599>

Could you tell us about your background in education and experience that prepared you for your present position?

I've been working for different NGOs for more than 10 years, and before coming to Finnwatch I worked, for example, for Amnesty International here in Finland and also Fairtrade. My educational background is in Turku University of Applied Sciences where I studied sustainable development. And, as for this interview, I understood that it's especially related to communications and communications in my present position, so I have to confess that I'm not a communication expert by profession and I have never had any formal training on communications... but I've learned fast.



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Could you describe your responsibilities as executive director of Finnwatch? In particular, how much of your work in this role involves writing and other forms of communication?

Yes, so we're a human rights organization focusing on corporate social responsibility, and we conduct research, publish research reports, and also do advocacy work on a national and EU level. And, uh... I'm in charge of our operations and leading my great but small team of experts. And my work, I would say that it's mostly about communication—uh, interaction with partners all around the world, writing reports, and planning our media and advocacy work. And for me, communication is not just about writing or giving presentations. Uh, it's about everything, everything that I do or we do at Finnwatch. So how we interact with people and exchange even normal emails or having meetings. Or, we think of what kind of words we use in our communication, what even impressions that we show on our face, and what we wear in a meeting with, uh, multinational companies. So all different aspects of communication needs to go together hand-in-hand in order for us to get the impact that we want.

How important do you consider professional communication to be in your work as executive director of Finnwatch?

Yes, so I would say that it's a very central part of my work, and it's a very important in all stages of our research projects that we do in Finnwatch. So before starting, for example, investigation work in another country, we need to build trust with the local research partners, NGOs, trade unions, workers, and companies. And, uh, it is also important to understand how communication works in different cultures, uh, in different countries, but also in... in different organizations. The culture between NGOs and multinational companies is very different, and we need to understand that. And of course, if we think about traditional or straightforward communication like writing reports or planning media work, it's very important. You can... you can spend months in writing, in conducting research, and... and writing the report, but if you then do bad media planning or bad media strategy, or write a bad press release,

then you waste a lot of resources and work and you will not be able to achieve what you are trying to achieve.

You mentioned the different culture between NGOs and multinational companies. Can you talk more about how culture factors into Finnwatch's work?

Well, I come from Finland, and we have quite, um, open culture, and we're used to going straight to the point when discussing with people, and we don't have a lot of hierarchies in our culture. So it's normal for us to go and meet the ministry and just... just say what we think of the political situation or... or some policies of Finnish government. But in many other countries, it's not like that, so you need to go around a bit before saying what you think and how you feel. And also it might take a very long time before you can have an open and straightforward discussion with your partner. And there are some things that you can't say to, for instance, older person or someone who is in a higher hierarchy level than you are yourself, so all of these kinds of things we need to take into account when... when meeting with different people in different countries.

What kinds of investigative work does Finnwatch do?

Uh, so we're mostly focused on... on corporate social responsibility, so we're looking into tax, uh, tax issues and also labor rights, uh, in so-called risk countries. A very normal report that we would do is to go on a field... field, uh, trip and meet with the workers of, such as factories or estates or plantations, in... in developing countries, for instance, and try to find out what kind of labor conditions the workers are in and then have meetings with local trade unions and NGOs and... and then send the findings to the factory owner and get their comments. And then, then we will compile all the evidence that we get and then publish a report. So, we're... the report is trying to achieve... or give information on what the situation is but also try to get change and improve people's lives.

What would you say are some challenges for international NGO writers whose work is intended to support social, economic, and environmental justice, especially in the Global South? And how have you addressed these challenges in your work?

Well, I would say that usually NGOs, uh... especially small NGOs like... like ours, are working with very limited resources but still facing high expectations from... from different stakeholders. And... for us, it's very important to check our sources and make sure that even though we have, uh, uh... quite limited resources, we have to have our facts right. And we have to practice very high-level integri... integrity in everything that we do. Uh... it can be that you make one mistake in wrong place and your credibility might be lost. So... and also, when operating in high-risk countries, like we do in... in countries like Thailand or Malaysia or... or India, you have to be aware of, uh, different kinds of risks, like facing uh... judicial risks, uh... getting sued, or... or facing different kind of harassment. For example, our researcher Andy Hall, uh... British uh, uh... academic, he has faced four lawsuits in Thailand because of the research that he did for us back in 2012. So, uh, we really try to, uh, do our own due diligence and mitigate risks and also be ready to support our local partners and... and also the workers we interview. So we have to, uh, understand the risks very well in different settings.

In what ways do you see technologies, especially information and communication technologies, either threatening or promoting social justice in the Global South?

I would say that, uh, new or relatively new communication technology and so... social media have a chance to promote social justice. Uh... information gets around faster than ever, I think. And civil society can reach international audience with very limited resources. Uh... but, at the same time, uh, world has become very fast, and many times very complicated problems, uh, are squeezed into, uh, Twitter tweets—like 100-character tweets—and people, at least in Finland, uh, we see that they become more and more impatient and, uh, looking for simple solutions in problems where such simple solutions might not even exist.

You mentioned social media, have you or your team used social media in your work with other countries? Or have you seen social media being taken up by those countries in ways that relate to your work?

Uh... yes, we use uh... social media uh... Facebook and Twitter um... quite a lot and also, we use social media when communicating with our partners in the countries where we do field research, so it's very easy to very quickly exchange information. And also, uh, we have a partner, for instance in Thailand, who's using social media uh... among migrant workers, so sharing information on labor rights and... and different kind of problems and grievances that they have, so it's a very useful... useful tool.

What advice might you offer to those of us responsible for developing, teaching, and administering a university professional communication program in order to prepare students to work as writers/researchers for an international NGO?

Uh... this is a difficult question. I'm not sure if I have very good advice. Um... I think um... social media, whether you work in a company or in an NGO, it's uh... changing the way... way you communicate or... or how people expect you to communicate, so I... I think you still need the basic skills in how to write for different audiences. Uh... but, nowadays, also your personality needs to show in what you do. And I... I guess good communication people need to be good people. They need to be honest and have integrity, believe in what they are saying, and walking the talk. So I... I... it's hard to teach... teach that, so a lot of challenges for... for teaching.

Looking at companies that are... are doing good job in... in communication, there usually, uh, you have your C... uh... CFO or CEO uh... in Twitter, so uh... you can make a lot of damage by just doing communication without being a hundred percent behind what you are saying. So I... I just think that the new way of communicating, social media, people being in Twitter and Facebook uh both in their personal life but in their work life. So I think it's changing the way... how people

should operate as a communication specialist. So it's not just writing something and then going home, but you really have to believe in what you say or at least try to make others believe that you believe it.

What advice might you offer NGOs as well as businesses and industries to facilitate joint research/teaching with professional communication academics?

As a watchdog organization, Finnwatch are not very familiar with this kind of cooperation, but we see at least here in Finland, there's a lot of political pressure from the government to make NGOs and universities to cooperate more and more with business and companies. And we see that this kind of cooperation can... can be good, but sometimes it also creates problems, especially when universities or NGOs are trying to be service providers for companies. So... I see that we already have a lot of consultants but too little great civil society and universities, so maybe uh... my advice would be that... that you need to know where you're coming from and what your uh... position and mission is and then start to cooperate with the business and other stakeholders. But as I said, as a watchdog organization, we uh... don't really have this kind of experience as we are uh... trying to stay on another side of the table, so to say.

What about collaboration between NGOs and academics, then?

I think that would be very... very good to have more cooperation with... between NGOs and academics. Uh... I think the problem is that academic research is uh... can take years before... so the timeline is very different. So... our reports will... we will um... start and publish a report in... in five or six or seven months, and then the academic world is uh... uh... three years or four years. So, uh, but definitely and... there... there would be room for more cooperation, and in Finland, we've started Finnwatch's network for NGOs that are working with the CSR [corporate social responsibility] issues and also academic uh... academic people, so we're trying to increase that kind of cooperation.

What kind of staff do NGOs such as Finnwatch have?

Um... I think it varies a lot. So, for instance, in my team I have a tax specialist, a guy who used to work for tax administration, and uh... and a lawyer uh... who's uh...

who has been focusing on labor rights and working in international labor organization as well as a person coming from Amnesty International, um, and uh... having her background in East Asian studies. Uh... so I... I think it varies a lot.

What kinds of research procedures or methodologies do you use when you do investigative work in different countries?

Yes, so we... we use a lot of uh—in our field research—we use interviews, so we interview the workers um... individually or in a group, and we collect uh... also documents like, in our case, salary slips, working contracts, uh... records of working hours, and things like that. And a very important part of our work is so we have an ethical code of conduct [see <http://www.finnwatch.org/en/what-we-do/ethical-guidelines>] for our research work, and we send all the findings to the company for... for comment before anything gets published. So that's... that's the way we try to make sure that all the... all factual errors that might be there in the report... uh... so they get a chance to correct them. And that we will... 'cause what the workers say is very... usually very different than what the company says, so then we try to um... estimate what the truth is between these usually very different stories and... and check the documents and... and then come back with an analysis and our own... own... own view on... on what the situation really is.

Can you talk more about this code of ethics?

Uh... yes, it's actually available on our website [see <http://www.finnwatch.org/en/what-we-do/ethical-guidelines>], so if anyone wants to go and check it out, so it's there. So that's one part of... of the... ethical guidelines—that it's public! And uh... so if anyone has a grievance or want to make a complaint, they can... they can do it. Uh... so it basically uh... sets a standard—how we choose our um... targets, so to say, for our research so... and... and to make sure that no third party is influencing our research and our analysis, and that we give a company or... or organization a chance to give comments to the findings and also protecting the... the workers or... or other stakeholders that we interview. So these kinds of issues are... are written down in... in this ethical code of conduct that we have.

Can you talk more about the role of culture in your work and how you and your staff address cultural issues?

So um... we... we use... local research partners in our... in our work, so we... want people who are familiar with the culture, language, uh... and... and can put the findings in a local context. So that's uh... we don't go usually ourselves and take a backpack and... and start working around in a... in a new country. So we use uh... local NGOs or... or experts. And also... it's also important when we find a problem there, so that we have a local partner who might... who might be able to help us fixing the problem... or with the company that we have been investigating. And, of course, our um... staff that we have are familiar with the countries where they are operating uh... and uh... we try to use a lot of time to familiarize ourselves to the local situation and... and do a lot of desk research before starting field... field research. So... uh... but basically it's about using local partners who are already familiar with the culture.

Do you find any challenges in working with these local researchers?

Yes, yes, there is a lot of challenges. Uh... so we are very strict in... in what we accept as a proof, so we want to have, for instance, copies of salary slips and... and working contracts, and everything needs to be recorded and... and organized and analyzed properly before we accept it. And of course there's uh... there are different cultures and uh... different ways of doing research uh... all over the world and... the best uh... like the partners... uh... we have a lot of partners who... who've been working with us for many years and they know uh... what our... our standard is, but of course, when we go to a new country and we start working with uh... new people, we... it takes a lot of time to... to get the process going uh... as we... we would like to... like it to go.

Sometimes... sometimes our... partner can see that something is... is more important than... than what we actually think it is. Uh... I think it's... I'm not sure if that's a cultural thing, but it's uh... related to different organizations. So if you are a very, so to say, aggressive local NGO that wants to see business doing bad all the

time, so it might be that we disagree with your analysis and then we have to discuss what we... why we think that the company is actually not doing that bad in that particular situation. And uh... so yes, we... sometimes we negotiate and... and... and go back and check the facts and see that our analysis of the situation uh... is coherent with what our local partners are... are thinking. And in some cases of course, it's another way around, so there might be um... culturally rooted racism or... or inequality. For instance, in India when we talk about Dalits, uh... there might be situations—or women—so situations where they are... uh... it's clear that they are being dis... discriminated at, but it's very hard to communicate that with your local partner or with the company that you are in talks with, 'cause they don't see it the way that we see it here in Finland. And it's also... sometimes we come across situations where a company might say that this is how... how it has been done, for instance, in India, so you don't understand because you come from uh... from Finland, and you... you don't... you all don't understand the caste system and... and so on. So... then these kind of cultural discussions are... are always difficult, but it's good that we base our work on... on international human rights, so we... we have quite good uh... good set of rules uh... where we can back uh... our work on. ■