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POLICY BRIEFS

Interlinking the human rights to water and sanitation with struggles for food and better livelihoods

AUTHORS: **Naho Mirumachi,** King's Water Centre, King's College London
Alison Griswold, Department of Geography, King's College London
Lyla Mehta, Institute of Development Studies
Shiney Varghese, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy
Claudia Ringler, International Food Policy Research Institute

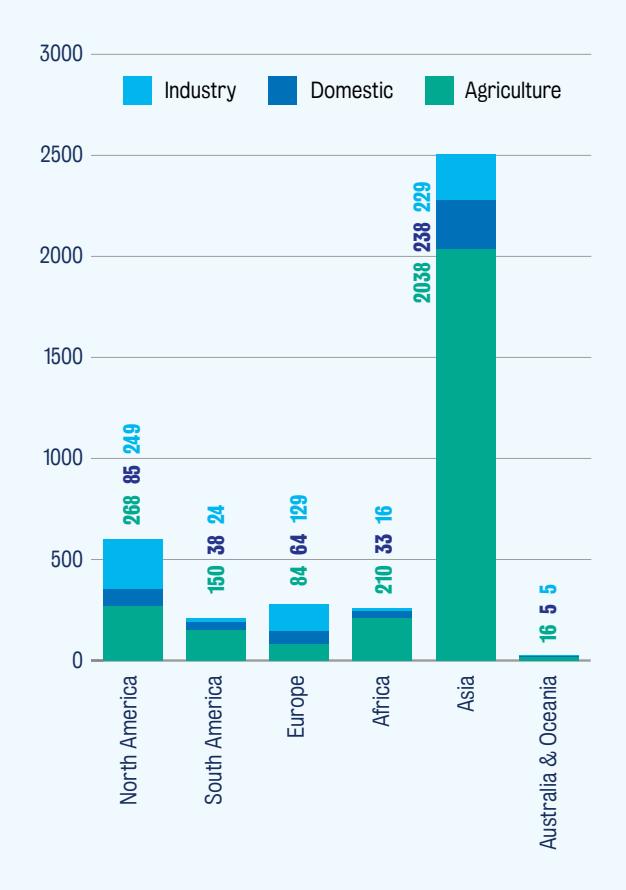
KEY MESSAGE

Safe and secure access to drinking water and sanitation are human rights that are vital to social, economic, and environmental wellbeing. While interpretations of these rights often focus on domestic water access – for example, whether someone has sufficient drinking water – there is increasing recognition that water for health, food security and nutrition, and basic livelihood needs are inextricably linked. A progressive approach to the human rights to water needs to consider interlinked priorities around food and livelihoods.

THE CONTEXT OF WATER AND FOOD

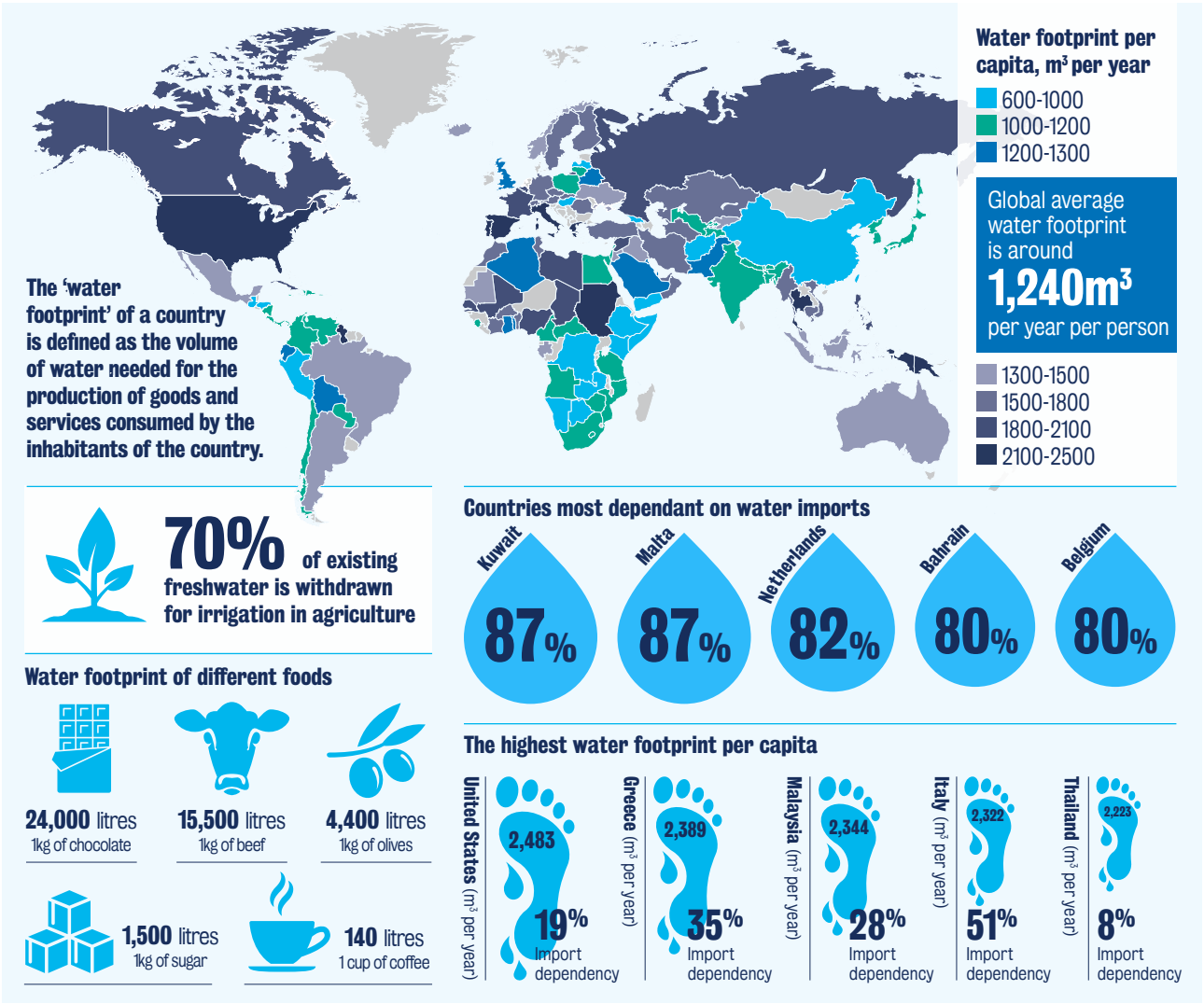
Agriculture is by far the largest user of water, measured both as overall global water withdrawals and in non-reusable, consumptive use (see Figure 1).[1] Demand for agricultural products is expected to grow 50% by 2050, mostly in low- and middle-income countries, putting pressure on already unsustainable levels of water use and degrading freshwater environments.[2] Much of the water embedded in food and other agricultural products is virtual water—that is, water that was required to produce the product or raise livestock, but remains invisible. Many countries are dependent on import of food and goods through trade, whereby virtual water 'flows' from one region to another (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: *Freshwater withdrawal in 2017 as measured in km³/year*



Source: United Nations, The United Nations World Water Development Report 2022: Groundwater: Making the invisible visible. UNESCO, Paris. P.15

Figure 2. *Global water footprint and agriculture*



Source: "World Water Footprint" by GDS Infographics is marked with CC BY 2.0.

The human rights to water in part concerns drinking water but aspects of food security and nutrition (FSN) are intricately connected. There are multiple users and uses of water in everyday life, and there are problems of trade-offs between the needs of large users of water for commercial purposes and local communities that rely on the same water source for multiple domestic and productive uses.[3] Competing claims are growing: between urban and rural as well as between larger and smaller water users; and increasingly between richer countries that have outsourced more of their food needs to low-income countries, putting pressure on water resources there. In Iringa, Tanzania, a land deal with an industrial farm degraded drinking water for 45,000 people due to use of chemical fertilizers and fungicides and cattle that grazed close to springs.[4] In India, the world's third-largest virtual water exporter, water-intensive crops like rice have drastically lowered groundwater tables, leading to widespread water and livelihood challenges.[5]

The world is not on track to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG6) 'Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all'. As of 2020, 2 billion people or 26% of the global population still lacked safely managed drinking water and 3.6 billion (46%) lacked safely managed sanitation.[6] Water for food production holds the key to avoid wasteful or over-use of water resources.[7] For SDG6 to become a reality, trade-offs and synergies with agricultural production systems need to be identified and adverse impacts on natural resources minimized. Otherwise, the human rights to water and sanitation, as well as FSN, cannot be realised.

Importantly, it is large-scale, industrial agriculture that puts pressure on water resources and impinges efforts to realise these human rights and to address FSN. There are big differences in the water use and impacts of farming between agribusinesses and individual home gardens. Considering how many countries, particularly wealthy ones, depend on food production and imports from low-income countries, there are considerations to be made about the scale and geography of industrial agriculture. The European Union, for example, is the world's largest importer of virtual water, with EU companies investing in close to 6 million hectares of land outside the EU for agriculture, biofuel production, and livestock production;

the EU's policies on the human rights to water, sanitation, and FSN thus have the potential to affect livelihoods far beyond the EU's borders.[8]

A NEW, PROGRESSIVE APPROACH TO WATER, FOOD, AND HEALTH

The human rights to drinking water and sanitation and the human right to adequate food are closely tied to each other. Safe water and sanitation are vital to health and good nutrition; water is also essential to food producers and food processing.[9] A progressive approach to the human rights to water therefore asks states not just to guarantee safe and reliable access to drinking water, but to pursue additional interlinked priorities around FSN, including water for livelihoods and homestead-based food production and processing. These include water for food production and local nutrition security, and water for animal keeping – for example, chicken keeping and vegetable cultivation by urban gardeners. Water resources of indigenous communities and those of marginalised women and men farmers are particularly jeopardised due to growing competition for dwindling resources.[10]

There is growing recognition of the close ties between these rights to water and food. For example, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, adopted in 2018, cites the rights to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation and also the right to water for "personal and domestic use, farming, fishing and livestock keeping and for securing other water-related livelihoods".[11] The recent resolution by the UN Human Rights Council recognising the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment[12] also has synergies with both water and FSN. This broader viewpoint of what the state owes its people marks a more progressive interpretation of the human right to water.

THE BENEFITS OF A SYNERGISTIC, HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

Growing concerns around water, land and related food scarcity have increased the drive of some countries and actors within countries to appropriate natural resources, chiefly land and water, for their own use. Negative impacts of so-called large-scale land and water grabs disproportionately affect the most vulnerable: women, children, underprivileged and indigenous communities, who often do not hold secure land titles.[13, 14] Similarly, the labour associated with water collection and sanitation in unplumbed areas overwhelmingly falls on women and girls – costs that can be exacerbated by agricultural projects that decrease water availability.[15]

Source: Mariélle Montginoul, Kairouan Governorate Rmadhniya_sept2014 www.flickr.com/photos/water_alternatives/37360237044/in/album

Woman fetching water, Tunisia

Regulating water development projects is complex as many rely on international transboundary rivers and aquifers, and exploitation of water in one part of the basin can have adverse impacts downstream.[16] Some of these projects are funded by opaque financial arrangements with little public disclosure or accountability. Problems arise when there is limited to no involvement of local communities, let alone obtaining the 'Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC),' a specific right accorded to indigenous peoples recognised in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), even when it is necessary. States with vested interests in corporate activities may provide companies with more favourable terms for water use than for their own populations. Powerful corporate interests may ultimately lead to policy capture that hinders the public good.[17]

A human rights-based approach to development is crucial to minimise trade-offs between development and local communities and to promote people-centric water projects that actively include women, indigenous, and marginalised groups that typically bear the burden of water provision.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS FOR A WAY FORWARD

Replace narrow assessments on drinking water or food needs with a multi-facated understanding of agriculture, livelihoods and FSN. For this, we need to address the lack of systematic data on the impacts of agriculture and industry on water resources and access to water by the poorest members of society. Exact figures on water withdrawals are hard to come by, for instance, and much of the water embedded in agricultural products is virtual water that is not immediately quantifiable. States could commission studies on pathways to sustainable food systems, by assessing holistic ecological (climate-biodiversity-water) footprints, and to better understand supply chains and their impacts on local communities.[18]

Enhance policies to protect the most vulnerable for their water, food and livelihood needs. States could choose to finance projects that take a human rights-based approach to water and emphasise people-centric development. Any potential investment in economic activities like agriculture that utilise water resources should consider effects on the most vulnerable, and development opportunities should be assessed with their impact on the FSN of local populations in mind. Similarly, agricultural projects should learn from indigenous communities, whose water harvesting techniques can promote resilience and sustainability while also proving highly effective.[19] With regard to the private sector, while governments should embrace voluntary commitments by businesses, they should also act to strengthen corporate due diligence and accounting and include virtual water in their assessment of how projects may impact the environment and local populations.[20]

Understanding the right to water as more than drinking water lays the groundwork for the sorts of policies that states and businesses must adopt to protect it. Water is a complex geopolitical resource and there is no single solution to the competing demands for the resource. That said, a progressive, human rights-based approach to water is a helpful and clarifying lens through which to view these challenges and to understand the trade-offs they entail, particularly between large-scale agriculture and vulnerable communities. Agriculture is the single largest user of freshwater, and as such essential to the understanding and realisation of the human right to water for all, as well as to the many other rights that are ultimately inseparable from water.

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7 HLPE (2015). Water for Food Security and Nutrition. A report by The High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome. Food Security and Nutrition
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12 UN General Assembly, 'Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 8 October 2021', A/HRC/RES/48/13
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17 Ibid.
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CONTACT

Lead researcher: Dr. Naho Mirumachi (naho.mirumachi@kcl.ac.uk), King's College London

ABOUT KING'S WATER CENTRE

King's Water Centre works to incubate, elevate, and empower the best science and innovation to tackle the world's water problems. We are curiosity-driven, interdisciplinary, and solutions-focused. Based in the heart of London, King's Water Centre brings together scholars and practitioners for a just and sustainable water future.

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DISCLAIMER AND FURTHER READING

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