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Better measuring of water supplies and uses vital to meet global and local needs

Many water problems the world faces are economic, social and political and could be solved by switching to the Green Economy

Copenhagen, Denmark, 10 May 2012 – Understanding how much water we have and then prioritizing our uses of it will be pivotal as the world strives in the coming decades to meet the water, energy, land and material needs of up to 9 billion people.

Such an effort is taking on special urgency against the backdrop of climate change, the need to reverse the rate of loss of biodiversity, improve public health and keep humanity's environmental footprint within planetary boundaries.

According to a report released today, the latest in a series of scientific assessments from the International Resource Panel, a multi-disciplinary grouping of eminent experts in natural resource management hosted by the United Nations Environment Programme, the world is entering a period of growing water scarcity: by 2030, global demand for fresh water could outstrip supply by more than 40 per cent if no changes are made with the way water is used.

But, according to the report, *Measuring Water Use in a Green Economy*, many of the water problems the world faces are economic, social and political in nature, rather than bio-physical and thus can be addressed by optimizing and balancing water use and needs between different sectors and ecosystems. In short, we could have enough water, but we need to make better use of it.

The report serves as a powerful reminder just weeks ahead of the Rio +20 global summit on sustainable development, to be held in Brazil in June, that the world needs to radically rethink the way it uses nature's resources.

According to the Resource Panel, the growing demands placed on our supply of water are not only the result of population growth, but also the way in which our economies develop. Since 1900, humanity's water consumption has grown at twice the rate of population growth, jumping from 600 billion cubic metres in 1900 to 4,500 billion cubic metres in 2010.

Countries at different developmental stages are already facing different challenges, requiring a range of solutions specific to each circumstance. A key factor in determining which solution is most appropriate will be the availability of data and information -- how much water is available, how it is being used, and the frameworks for assessing the distributional needs of each society.

Measuring Water Use in a Green Economy recommends that water needs for environment should be treated as a vital priority in order to ensure the reliable supply of basic regulatory ecosystem services that underpin the delivery of social and economic activities-valuable provisioning services. In essence, water ecosystems must function properly and make clean and sufficient water available for food production – crops, animal husbandry and fish, drinking water supply, energy production and cultural values.

Water accounting is seen as a crucial tool for the purpose of overall water management and the generation of economic assessments, alongside GDP growth and other economy-wide indicators such as greenhouse gas emissions. There is a need to consider ecosystem services within such resource accounting schemes to establish the links between resource efficiency, biodiversity and ecosystem services and the connection to the social values of water.

Measuring Water Use in a Green Economy was launched in Copenhagen at the 10th Meeting of the International Resource Panel, where holistic approaches to the management of global resources are key issues.

An important trend that emerges from the report is a significant and growing interest from the private sector in taking water resources into account when considering future business. For public bodies to determine water balances, there is a need not only to produce quantitative estimates of stocks and flows but also to assess the impact of fluctuations and uncertainties that are associated with the global hydrological cycle, water licences, access rights and on the quality of water.

When determining the balance between water demands and availability, we must consider how best to use water available to sustain the many different types of ecosystem services. One important conclusion is that there is a common need across all methodologies and approaches for data and information at the river basin scale.

The major conclusions of the report are:

- Water registers are a key to the fair distribution of and access to water.

- Accounting can provide governments with knowledge of how water, as part of the natural capital of ecosystems, is linked to the economy and human well-being.
- Water footprint assessment can provide a tool for awareness raising to highlight water issues in production and consumption, especially in areas such as agriculture and food industries.
- Life-cycle assessment and the various standards associated with it can provide benchmarking for industries.
- Water stewardship can help improve quantification in corporate water monitoring.

Quotable quotes

"A significant challenge in establishing 'sustainable water management' is to quantify decoupling, particularly in terms of developing accurate measures of water use and its impacts on ecosystems. This knowledge is essential to support efforts to set targets, design policy instruments and monitor progress. Unfortunately, the availability of relevant data is currently limited."
-- **Jacqueline McGlade**, lead author and member UNEP International Resource Panel, and Executive Director of European Environment.

"The *Measuring Water Use in a Green Economy* report is the first of in a series of three major reports by the International Resource Panel on this issue and an important contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals that are likely to emerge from the Rio+20 process post June 2012".
-- **Achim Steiner**, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director

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About the International Resource Panel

The International Resource Panel or IRP for short, launched in November 2007, provides the scientific impetus to resource management and environmental sustainability. The objectives of the Resource Panel are to:

- Provide independent, coherent and authoritative scientific assessments of policy relevance on the sustainable use of natural resources and in particular their environmental impacts over the full life cycle; and
- Contribute to a better understanding of how to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation.

For more information: www.unep.org/resourcepanel

About UNEP

Created in 1972, UNEP represents the United Nations' environmental conscience. Based in Nairobi, Kenya, its mission is to provide leadership and encourage partnership in caring for the environment by inspiring, informing, and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations. UNEP's Division of Technology, Industry and Economics - based in Paris - helps governments, local authorities and decision-makers in business and industry to develop and implement policies and practices focusing on sustainable development. The Division leads UNEP's work in the areas of climate change, resource efficiency, harmful substances and hazardous waste. For more information: www.unep.org