



GLOBAL COMMISSION on the
ECONOMICS OF WATER

Brief: A Global Water Data Infrastructure for a Resilient Hydrological cycle

Inspired by the final report of the Global
Commission on the Economics of Water –
The Economics of Water: *Valuing the Hydrological
Cycle as a Global Common Good.*

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August 2025





The Global Commission of the Economics of Water (GCEW) report sets out the shifts required to drive radical changes in how water is valued, managed, and used. The new economics of water begins by recognizing that the hydrological cycle must now be governed as a global common good. This can only be fixed collectively, through concerted action in every country, and collaboration across boundaries and cultures, for benefits that will be felt everywhere.

The GCEW identifies data as a critical enabler of change. It is a key dimension of the new way of governing, both nationally and internationally, that benefits both people and the planet. However, the water data landscape is highly fragmented and exhibits significant gaps. Alarming, data collection and quality have declined in recent years. This policy brief aims to guide policymakers in how water data across disciplines can be harnessed as a foundation for action to successfully tackle the Global Commission's five missions and safeguard our global common good.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank Surajit Ghosh and Marie-Charlotte Buisson for their valuable contributions in reviewing earlier versions of this brief.

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Key messages

- **Complete, interoperable, and publicly available data is a critical enabler** to protect a resilient hydrological cycle. Data underpins shifts in how we value and govern water, evaluation of interventions and the progress of missions, and accountability among stakeholders. However, the current data landscape is highly fragmented and exhibits significant gaps, including green water being largely overlooked.
- **Water data extends beyond traditional water measurements.** Hydrological and biophysical data, together with socioeconomic and behavioral data, governance and institutional data, and knowledge systems and local data, are imperative for informing effective, comprehensive, and context-sensitive pathways.
- **Missing or low-quality water data can be traced to technical, financial, political, and legal bottlenecks** related to both data collection and dissemination, each of which plays out at administrative, hydrological, transboundary, and business scales. Considering the multi-scale and stakeholder magnitude of the data challenge, addressing these gaps requires economy-wide, coordinated action.
- **Establishing a Global Water Data Infrastructure can help address the green and blue water data gap, integrate data from across disciplines, and democratize data access and utilization.** It would enable participatory, science-based decision-making to achieve economic efficiency, social equity, and environmental sustainability.
- **Green water data, like evapotranspiration, soil moisture, and land cover, must be strengthened.** Integrating green water considerations into policy approaches and management tools such as water accounts, integrated water resource management, and climate risk assessments, as well as voluntary and mandatory corporate disclosure frameworks, can incentivize green water monitoring and data collection.
- **Democratizing access to water data and providing tools for its interpretation empowers citizens to play a role in water monitoring, management, and governance.** Community-based monitoring approaches offer opportunities to complement data gaps while advancing data justice.



(photo: Jan Ziegler/Shutterstock)

Context

Climate change and unsustainable land and water use are disrupting the global hydrological cycle, threatening economies, livelihoods, and ecosystems. Safeguarding a resilient water cycle and stable green water (soil and plant moisture, evapotranspiration) and blue water (rivers, lakes, groundwater) requires systemic, collective, and economy-wide action. To transform the way we value water, the Global Commission proposes five missions (see Box 1) to drive innovation in policies, institutions, and technologies [1].

Complete, interoperable, and publicly available water data is foundational for catalyzing shifts, tracking progress, and enabling accountability. Yet, the water data landscape remains fragmented with significant gaps and limited integration of non-environmental data. This policy brief outlines how data can be harnessed as a foundation for action with the ultimate ambition of establishing a Global Water Data Infrastructure addressing the full hydrological cycle. A robust data system that empowers public access and interpretation of key water data will enable participatory and informed action to protect the global common good.

Box 1: Five missions to stabilize the hydrological cycle

1. Launch a new revolution in food systems to meet the nutritional needs of a growing population.
2. Conserve and restore natural habitats critical to protect green water.
3. Establish a circular water economy.
4. Enable a clean-energy and AI-rich era with much lower water intensity.
5. Ensure that no child dies from unsafe water by 2030.

Key challenges and implications

A fragmented water data landscape

Water data encompasses all data to understand, manage, and govern the hydrological cycle as a global common good. It extends beyond traditional water metrics to cover four interconnected dimensions:

- (1) Hydrological and Biophysical Data – water quantity (green and blue), quality, flows, groundwater, soil moisture, evapotranspiration, and land cover.
- (2) Socioeconomic and Behavioral Data – household water access, affordability, agricultural and industrial use, financing flows, and consumption patterns.
- (3) Governance and Institutional Data – policies, regulations, permits, compliance, investments, and transboundary agreements.
- (4) Knowledge Systems and Local Data – Indigenous and traditional knowledge, community-based monitoring, and citizen-generated observations.

These diverse data provide the foundation for evidence-based, equitable, and sustainable water decisions at all levels.

Today, global water data is incomplete, non-interoperable, often private, and poorly integrated, reflecting limited institutional capacity, citizen engagement, inter-agency coordination, and funding, alongside reluctance to share data. While existing data-sharing initiatives provide essential coverage, especially for hydrological and biophysical data, they remain limited in scope.

The siloed data landscape impedes coherent, science-based policy and financial decision-making and the data revolution that transformed other sectors has yet to translate to water stewardship at scale. Concerted action is needed to strengthen the quantity, quality, frequency, and democratization of water data.

Why is water data missing?

Hydrological data collection and quality have declined in recent years [2], with green water data largely overlooked [3, 4]. The gap stems from technical, financial, political, and legal bottlenecks (see Figure 1).

Challenges

Technical
Legal
Financial
Political



Figure 1: Why is water data missing?

Source: Global Commission on the Economics of Water (2024).

At the administrative scale, both rural and urban areas face low institutional capacity and limited funds for data collection. Monitoring systems are fragmented and outdated, citizen science is underutilized, and legal mandates are weak. Groundwater quantity and quality, despite making up 97% of all blue water resources [5], are largely neglected in water management and policymaking [6].

Aquifer monitoring is also limited by high costs and complex mapping. Watershed and basin data are often coarse or constrained by weak coordination. Transboundary blue water data are inconsistently reported, and green water (soil moisture and evapotranspiration) is largely absent in policy and climate risk assessments. A lack of globally agreed frameworks and definitions for water resilience has produced an abundance of indicators inhibiting interoperability [7].

The role of businesses transcends these scales where challenges include limited investments in monitoring systems and voluntary data disclosure. Existing regulations rarely address the pressure businesses place on blue and green water across the entire life cycle, including land use.

Data deficiencies persist as a barrier to action

Robust water data underpin effective measures towards hydrological resilience. Integrated water data enable holistic policy design, planning, monitoring, and evaluation that consider the needs of future generations. Non-environmental water data, and indigenous and local knowledge complement hydrological data for context-sensitive solutions and access to data and interpretation tools empowers citizens to engage in governance.

Economic regulation can incentivize private and public water utilities to disclose robust performance and cost-efficiency data, informing investment. Disaggregated data on informal and formal water services visualizes local inequalities and supports equitable planning [8].

Water data enable financial institutions and businesses to assess green and blue water risks, impacts, dependencies, and opportunities, including those linked to land use and virtual water trade [9]. These analyses help businesses mitigate water, climate, and nature risks across supply chains and report under disclosure frameworks.

This way, data empowers stakeholders to build sustainable livelihoods and resilient economies by promoting economic efficiency, social equity, and environmental sustainability.

Policy Recommendations

Establishing a global water data infrastructure

To address the green and blue water data gaps and integrate water data from across disciplines, we propose the creation of a Global Water Data Infrastructure. The initiative will provide stakeholders access to an integrated water data platform covering every level of the hydrological cycle and socioeconomic, governance, and local and traditional knowledge dimensions.

The platform will build on and complement notable initiatives like the Global Runoff Data Centre – a global platform featuring river discharge data [10]. To improve data interoperability and enable comparative analysis and benchmarking, a key objective will be harmonization with internationally recognized measurement and reporting frameworks. The infrastructure will also support the development of new data generation capabilities and leverage digital innovation tools like artificial intelligence, especially in areas with limited resources and monitoring capabilities to ensure more equitable data coverage (see Box 2). This will help raise global awareness on water conservation, enable informed decision-making, multi-stakeholder governance, and market incentive mechanisms, while fostering accountability and innovation.

Box 2: Levering AI to improve water management in the Limpopo River Basin

The transboundary Limpopo River Basin in southern Africa faces various challenges, including drought, over abstraction, and pollution. To support sustainable water management in the basin, the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), in collaboration with the Limpopo Watercourse Commission (LIMCOM), Digital Earth Africa, and Microsoft, has developed the Limpopo Water Copilot, which creates AI agents for water management.

The AI agents are based on a digital twin – i.e., a virtual representation of the Limpopo River Basin, that combines up-to-date river data from monitoring stations, historical data, satellite imagery, remote sensing, and modeling to fill in data gaps and create a functional model of the basin. The Limpopo Water Copilot, in turn, features an integrated chatbot that, when prompted, determines which tools and information from the digital twin are relevant and then uses generative AI to summarize an answer in English and Portuguese, complemented by visualizations such as maps and charts. The chatbot will also be accessible via a mobile app, with the ability to measure and visualize irrigation water use at various scales and to provide water accounting data.

This way, the technology saves time on report preparation and data analysis, allowing water managers to focus on responding quickly to the basin's challenges. By producing science-based analyses that can be used instantly by both expert and non-expert users and decision-makers, it also democratizes access to water management data in one of the largest basins in southern Africa. [11]

Governments should manage this digital public infrastructure to support the efficient, equitable, and environmentally sustainable governance of the hydrological cycle in the public interest [12]. To effectively realize the potential of the initiative, a coalition of implementation partners and robust engagement with rights- and stakeholders, including multilateral institutions, businesses, financial institutions, governments, youth, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities, is critical.

Unlocking the potential of green water data

Given that green water data is largely overlooked, advancing green water monitoring to match blue water is important for integrated strategies and metrics that capture dimensions of climate, water (green and blue), and biodiversity and support cross-sectoral coherence.

Green water data measure moisture in soils and plants (stocks) and evapotranspiration (flows). Long-term, globally harmonized datasets of soil moisture are needed to understand impacts on the water cycle from climate change, land use, and management interventions. Additionally, data on terrestrial moisture recycling and land use change are critical for understanding atmospheric moisture flows and land-atmosphere interactions. Atmospheric moisture tracking and global hydrological models rely on harmonized datasets of climate variables, which means that improving these underlying data is paramount. Technological advances, including low-cost satellite monitoring and machine-learning integration, capture green water parameters such as soil moisture and evapotranspiration at increasingly fine, near-field scales.

The lack of green water data also reflects the limited policy recognition. Integrating green water consideration into policy and management tools such as water accounts, integrated water resource management, and climate risk assessments, as well as corporate disclosure frameworks, can incentivize green water monitoring and data collection.

Integrating water data for collective action

Integrating water data across scales and disciplines is key to systemically valuing green and blue water and guiding decision-making. Visualizing virtual water can inform more efficient use of water resources globally [13], while behavioral data offers insights for justice and local policy design.

Innovative tools and methods are indispensable for addressing the challenges of integrating data across disciplines, sources, and scales. Methods like water accounts bridge economic and biophysical data, supporting ecosystem valuation and land-use planning, among other applications [14]. The System of Environmental-Economic Accounting for Water (SEEA-Water), for example, provides a comprehensive and systematic framework for understanding the interactions between the economy and the environment and gives policymakers key information to support integrated water resources management [15]. To account for the full hydrological cycle, there is scope to expand the framework to consider green water.

Additional tools include IWMI's Aquaculture Decision Support Tool [16], which integrates biophysical, socioeconomic, and infrastructural, environmental, and climatic factors to analyze land suitability and availability for aquatic food production and supports land use planning that balances development and environmental goals. WaPOR [17] is another example that leverages remote sensing to monitor green water use and generate data on agricultural water productivity at different spatial scales. To fully capture the potential of data integration as showcased by these methods and tools, more resources are needed to build capacity and spur innovation.

Democratizing data for efficiency, equity, and sustainability

Effective collective action relies on data justice: ensuring inclusive data collection, access, and interpretation. Data justice is achieved by engaging citizens in data collection, maintaining publicly accessible data, and capacity to empower individuals with the knowledge to effectively engage with the data.

Since any effective and long-term policy requires meaningful engagement with a wide variety of rights holders and stakeholders, as well as intergenerational continuity, it becomes crucial to engage with, learn from, and inform these groups – including local communities, youth, and Indigenous Peoples. In turn, this will harness a breadth and depth of skills, perspectives, and innovative thinking, advancing scientific and policy development.

Box 3: The Blue Map

While tremendous growth in recent decades has benefited hundreds of millions in China, the resulting pollution has increased water risks and damaged freshwater ecosystems. To address these challenges, the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs developed the Blue Map [18] and app (3.8 million users), which aggregates and visualizes pollution data, enables citizen reporting, and displays government responses and rectification progress.

The widespread adoption of the Blue Map has strengthened data availability, regulatory enforcement, and pollution clean-up, leading to measurable water quality improvements. Such granular and dynamic data also support sustainable value chains. Major businesses have incorporated Blue Map data into their sourcing standards, motivating tens of thousands of suppliers to address violations, disclose emissions, and take remedial action. [19]

The Blue Map illustrates how transparency, public participation, and access to water data enable regulatory enforcement, corporate accountability, and corrective action, thereby contributing to improved water quality and sustainable development.

Citizen engagement in monitoring and data gathering can complement public and private efforts while supporting data justice (see Box 3). Unlocking the potential of citizen science will require strengthening local capacity for data collection and analysis, including intercultural approaches, by providing funding, technical support, and training to local institutions and communities. Community-based monitoring (CBM) offers an efficient, affordable, and scalable approach (see Box 4). While CBM is not designed to meet the standards of professional tests, it can potentially deliver data at a larger scale, higher frequency, and more affordable cost, and complement government efforts.

Box 4: Democratizing water quality monitoring through CBM

In many countries, lack of reliable, public, and real-time data on drinking water quality hinders community empowerment, informed decisions, and accountability.

Digital innovation and low-cost monitoring equipment have shown potential to bridge this data gap. In India and Tanzania, a water quality monitoring tool integrating a customized mobile phone application with low-cost water quality sensors was piloted. After receiving brief training, about 30 local women with minimal pre-existing skills collected data from hundreds of household and public sources. The data was found to be highly reliable, demonstrating community agents' ability to deliver relatively accurate data consistently. [20]

The pilot demonstrates the potential of CBM to democratize water quality monitoring cost-effectively. Considering the potential for scaling, partnership platforms could enable local governments, universities, and community organizations to implement programs across geographies. The platform would be based on a digital system for uniform data collection, verification, and presentation to reliably assess community water conditions.

A Six-Step Roadmap Towards A Comprehensive Global Water Data Infrastructure

Step 1: Define the Institutional Structure of the Global Water Data Platform

In its initial phase, considering the current heterogeneity of water data, the global platform could be structured as a findable, accessible, interoperable, reusable (FAIR) catalog of data. Mapping and collaborating with existing databases and data-sharing initiatives will ensure that the catalog draws on and complements current efforts. The design and construction of the platform would be overseen and coordinated by a Commission composed of a range of stakeholders, which would select relevant, high-quality data.

Step 2: Consolidate and Share Data

Gather existing water data from publicly available sources by mobilizing digital technologies. This data is then consolidated into a water data platform with maps, charts, and other visualization tools to promote data accessibility and transparency.

Step 3: Enhance Stakeholder Data Contributions

Encourage international agencies, industry associations, research organizations, and countries and regions to engage with and contribute their water data voluntarily to the global water data platform. Invite stakeholders to co-develop a process to identify how to integrate various data into different knowledge systems.

Step 4: Promote Economy-wide Action and Good Governance Based on Data

Analysis of the collected data and share case studies of best practices by various stakeholders to motivate expanded collection, monitoring, and disclosure of water data, and inform and guide water-related decision-making. Encourage data and evaluations produced by initiatives funded by blended finance to be made publicly available as a public value.

Step 5: Bridge Information and Monitoring Gaps and Mobilize Support for Capacity Building

Pinpoint crucial information for all stakeholders, as well as gaps in monitoring and reporting, and develop strategies and identify funding support to bridge these gaps. High-income regions, multilateral organizations, multilateral development banks, and coalitions of the willing can share best practices, provide capacity-building, and offer technical and financial support to middle- and low-income regions in working towards a data governance framework, including CBM approaches.

Step 6: Promote Global Data Standardization and Mutual Recognition

Facilitate discussions and consensus-building among regions and businesses on water monitoring norms and regional and corporate water data reporting formats, aiming for global harmonization, consistency, and mutual recognition to enhance data interoperability.

Through these strategic steps, the Global Water Data Infrastructure will enhance transparency, participation, evidence-guided decision-making for sustainable green and blue water management, supporting a resilient hydrological cycle and safe and just water futures.

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Citation:

Adolfsson, E. 2025. *Brief: a global water data infrastructure for a resilient hydrological cycle*. Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Water Management Institute (IWMI). 12p. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5337/2025.243>

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Front cover photograph: Drones in Tanzania used as a low-cost and effective method of monitoring crops and water, complementary to satellite information (*photo*: Caleb O'Brien and Bill Allen/University of Missouri)

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The International Water Management Institute (IWMI) is an international, research-for-development organization that works with governments, civil society, and the private sector to solve water problems in developing countries and scale up solutions. Through partnership, IWMI combines research on the sustainable use of water and land resources, knowledge services and products with capacity strengthening, dialogue, and policy analysis to support implementation of water management solutions for agriculture, ecosystems, climate change, and inclusive economic growth. Headquartered in Colombo, Sri Lanka, IWMI is a CGIAR Research Center with offices in 17 countries and a global network of scientists operating in more than 55 countries.



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