

# “The corporate water footprint as a global standard”



Arjen Hoekstra is Professor in Multidisciplinary Water Management at the University of Twente in the Netherlands and Scientific Director of the Water Footprint Network. Hoekstra is creator of the water footprint concept (2002) that originates from research he started when working at UNESCO-IHE. More information can be found on the website: [www.waterfootprint.org](http://www.waterfootprint.org).

According to the Water Footprint Network, reducing the water footprint should be part of the environmental strategy of every business, just like reducing the carbon footprint. Addressing the issues of freshwater scarcity and pollution is also part and parcel of corporate social responsibility.

## TURNING RISKS INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Considering and mitigating the water footprint can turn risks into opportunities for those companies that proactively respond to the challenge of global freshwater scarcity. Front runners who create product transparency before others do, who formulate specific and measurable targets with respect to water footprint reduction, and who can demonstrate actual improvements, can turn this into a competitive advantage. Professor Arjen Hoekstra, Scientific Director at the Water Footprint Network and creator of the water footprint concept explains: “I am seeing a trend in the awareness, recognition and importance of the concept of corporate water footprinting in many countries around the world.” He continues: “Companies can start by reducing their water footprint in the supply chain. The Water Footprint Network sets global standards, definitions and calculation methods. Now more relevant and internationally recognised organisations are joining our network of professionals. Unilever, for instance, is also a partner within the Water Footprint Network. They are interested in calculating their products’ water footprint (mostly agricultural produce) to see how this can be reduced in the entire supply chain. I believe that in the next few years companies will increasingly use the water footprint as a key performance indicator.

Waterfootprint assessments have become mandatory in Spain, as part of the national implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive, a framework established in 2000 for community action in the field of water policy. It is expected that in the future, more governments will carry out water footprint assessments, to better understand how different final consumer commodities put different claims on limited water resources. The interest is largest in water-scarce regions where water is being used for export products. “Companies see these new developments as a major risk,” Hoekstra says. “Not only is their corporate image at stake, there is a looming threat that governments will start regulating more and more. This risk can be brought down when companies start to look for other opportunities, such as market advantages in terms of producing ‘greener’ products, thereby adhering to corporate social responsibility.

## TOWARDS A GLOBAL STANDARD

“In the next five years this could translate into governments even adjusting their development policies based on the water footprint data. The pitfall is that everyone will use it to their own benefit; so much so that it will become a meaningless metaphor. The challenge is to try to regulate the corporate water footprint and mainstream it as a global standard,” explains Hoekstra. “It will take many more measures and significant changes in attitudes and behaviour. The world has not suddenly become simplified. Labeling and certifying products are not simple solutions to complex issues. What really matters is sustainable water management, equitable and efficient water use, and solid communication tools to reach consumers at a national, regional and eventually local level.”

## COLUMN

### What’s in a name – iHE ...?

When the international course in *Hydraulic Engineering* started way back in 1957, the means of communication were quite simple. Letters were sent via surface mail (or airmail if really urgent) and course notes were hand typed using a “fresh carbon ribbon” and white-out liquid eraser for correcting mistakes. Those of you who remember these days are probably close to retirement now, those of you who don’t may experience even greater changes during your own professional lifetime. In any case, with this the abbreviation was readily established ... *IHE*.

Then came the days of the multiple I’s and multiple E’s: the *International Institute for Infrastructure, Hydraulic and Environmental Engineering*. Manuscripts of lecture notes were handed to qualified secretaries and skilfully entered into the state-of-the-art word processors that filled the Typing Room. Perhaps computers were being used by some of the younger staff for calculations, but the seniors preferred blackboard and chalk – who in the developing world would be using computers after all? So the abbreviation remained – *IHE* ... What followed may be familiar to many of us: the World Wide Web boomed and became a tool for communication – also in the developing world. More computers entered the buildings and the institute enhanced its international profile by transferring into a *UNESCO Category I Institute for Water Education*. But the abbreviation remained – *IHE* ...

So what’s in store? What is our future in the era of real-time global communication, video conferencing, Skype sessions, distance learning, virtual lecturing, Twitter, Facebook and more? Should we stick to chopping down trees and sending out thousands of flyers to embassies, in the hope that someone may just stop by and apply for admittance? Or should we be developing apps for smartphones, connecting alumni worldwide, providing electronic invitations to apply for our continued education, interact online with our staff – and perhaps, following the trend set by Apple: iPod, iPhone, iPad, and change the Institute’s abbreviation into – *iHE* ...?

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