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| **Media Backgrounder** |

WWF calls on world leaders to think differently about nature to ensure food, water and energy security

The figures paint a stark picture.

* One in five people live in extreme poverty.
* One in seven people are undernourished.
* One in seven people don’t have water to meet their basic needs.
* One in six people live without electricity or with only erratic access.

The resources required to change these dire facts are all around us. They are our rivers, forests, soil and oceans – and we need to rethink how we use and value them if we hope to eradicate poverty.

Poverty runs far deeper than just lack of income. It affects all aspects of life – health, educational opportunities, access to work, and self-worth.

**WWF Director General Jim Leape** said, “Overcoming poverty is tied to ensuring access to the essentials – food, water and energy. All three are crucial to personal well-being, as well as forming the lifeblood of economies. And all depend on healthy, functioning ecosystems. Rio+20 comes at the right moment to deliver a new framework with an integrated approach to address these common challenges.”

**The food, water, energy nexus**

Agencies and organizations have been working on food, water and energy security for decades but, for the most part, they have treated them like distinct issues. The food, water, energy nexus is about capitalizing on their interdependence, and developing policies to enhance all three, rather than one at the expense of the others. “Nexus thinking” also recognizes that it is essential to conserve the natural capital on which food, water and energy resources depend.

Sugar provides an example of the nexus. Due to a combination of failing rains in India and Brazil, cane crops being converted to ethanol fuels, projections of economic recovery and growing demand in Asia, the price of sugar broke records in 2009. The price doubled in six months. The consequences of volatile food prices will always be most severe for poor nations and poor families

– pushing the vulnerable to the breaking point.[[1]](#footnote-1) This was just one case in which climate change, land-use and energy policy, agriculture practice and consumption patterns collided, tangibly affecting people’s well-being.

**A billion hungry people**

It’s not possible to achieve sustainable development without eradicating hunger for the one billion people who don’t have enough to eat. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) there is enough food available to feed the world, but large disparities in food distribution impede the fight against hunger.

As shown in the 2012 edition of WWF’s *Living Planet Report,* increasing demand for food and cropland, particularly for meat and dairy products, is a fundamental driver of environmental degradation.

To ensure universal access to food by 2030,WWF is calling on governments and businesses to:

* Increase efficiency in the food system by reducing waste in food production and distribution.
* Promote alternative consumption patterns, including more balanced diets in high-income countries, with less meat, fish and dairy.
* Reduce agriculture’s footprint by making sustainable food production central to development, and encouraging treatment and re-use of wastewater for agriculture.

**2.7 billion people without clean water and basic sanitation**

Today more than 900 million people lack access to clean drinking water and 2.7 billion lack access to basic sanitation.[[2]](#footnote-2) Over 20 per cent of the rivers worldwide run dry before reaching the sea[[3]](#footnote-3) and groundwater across the world is over-drafted.[[4]](#footnote-4) About two million tonnes of human waste are dumped into watercourses every day[[5]](#footnote-5) and 70 per cent of untreated industrial waste in developing countries is discharged into water supplies.[[6]](#footnote-6)

To ensure universal access to water and sanitation by 2030,WWF is calling on governments and businesses to:

* Manage water according to the Earth’s carrying capacity rather than along political boundaries. WWF suggests a framework of integrated, participatory river basin management.
* Invest in integrated programming between freshwater conservation and water, sanitation and hygiene.
* Protect and restore freshwater ecosystems so they can sustain biodiversity and the functions that are vital for human health, livelihoods, well-being and security.
* Reduce cities’ water footprint and water risks in urban settings, and increase their resilience to climate change.

**More than 1 billion people live with little or no electricity**

About 1.3 billion people have erratic or no access to electricity and 2.7 billion people– mostly in impoverished regions of South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa – meet the majority of their energy needs with biomass (charcoal, fuel wood, agricultural waste and dung) for cooking and heating.

To ensure universal access to energy by 2030,WWF is calling on governments and businesses to:

* Introduce fiscal policy and incentives to drive private investment in renewable, reliable and sustainable energy in developing countries.
* Develop economically viable domestic industries and services to make access to clean energy affordable to all.
* Combat climate change and reduce fossil fuel price volatility by ensuring at least 40 per cent of energy is produced from sustainable renewable sources.

**The nexus in action**

*Food, Water and Energy security in the Mekong Basin*

The Mekong River winds 4,800kms through Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and the southern province of Yunnan in China. It is second only to the Amazon River in terms of fish biodiversity, with an estimated 1,100 species of fish swimming in its waters. The Mekong River basin accounts for up to 25 per cent of the global freshwater catch, making it the world's largest inland fishery. It is a vital source of food security and livelihoods for more than 60 million people living in the Mekong region.

With offices in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, WWF is working with government, industry and NGO partners to secure a future where policy and business practice support biodiversity conservation and sustainable use of natural resources.

The lower section of the Mekong River is still free-flowing as it runs from the Chinese border through Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam. Forecasts from the Mekong River Commission show damming the lower Mekong would reduce fishery productivity by more than 60 per cent. To paraphrase the FAO, the amount of fish lost would be the equivalent to up to 3.5 times the entire beef production of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. This would directly impact the food security and livelihoods of 60 million people dependent on the Mekong’s fishery.

Yet, hydropower is seen as an avenue to poverty alleviation and development for the emerging economies of the region. However, gaps in the understanding of ecosystem functions, and impacts on fisheries and sediment dynamics prevent accurate assessments of the risks associated with dam construction.

WWF supports a ten-year delay in the approval of lower Mekong river mainstream dams to ensure a comprehensive understanding of all the impacts of their construction and operation. Immediate electricity demands can be met by fast-tracking the most sustainable hydropower sites on the lower Mekong’s tributaries. WWF is developing tools to help assess which tributaries can be developed for hydropower without compromising the ecological integrity of the lower Mekong basin.

WWF believes the Mekong can be an example of how nexus thinking allows people to live in harmony with nature, while securing access to food, water and energy.

At Rio+20, world leaders need to think differently about food, water and energy security – they need to embrace nexus thinking. We call on them to agree to ambitious goals to deliver universal access to food, water and energy by 2030, with social, economic and environmental considerations embedded as objectives under each of these goals.

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**For photos Food, Water & Energy**

<https://photos.panda.org/gpn/external?albumId=4262>

**About WWF**

WWF is one of the world's largest and most respected independent conservation organizations, with more than 5 million supporters and a global network active in over 100 countries. WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the Earth's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by conserving the world's biological diversity, ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable, and promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

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1. Water security: the food water-energy-climate-nexus: the World Economic Forum water initiative / [edited by] Dominic Waughray / pp. 80-81 ‘The Risks and Rewards of Water in Trade’, Stuart Orr, WWF International; Guy Pegram, Advisor, WWF South Africa. 2011 World Economic Forum [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [UNDP, 2011](http://www.undp.org/water/) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [UNCTAD, 2011](http://bit.ly/jh0FS5) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [Kerschner and Geraghty, 2009](http://bit.ly/uMoM5l) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [SCBD, 2010](http://bit.ly/cwAPuU) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [WWF, 2010b](http://bit.ly/an8GZC) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)