

# A Snapshot of the World's Water Quality: Towards a global assessment

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# Acknowledgements

# **UNEP** Coordination

Hartwig Kremer, Norberto Fernandez (until 2013), Patrick Mmayi, Keith Alverson & Thomas Chiramba (until 2015)

# **Project Coordination**

Dietrich Borchardt & Ilona Bärlund Department of Aquatic Ecosystem Analysis, Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ

# **Chief Editor**

Joseph Alcamo Center for Environmental Systems Research (CESR), University of Kassel

## **Scientific Editors**

Joseph Alcamo Center for Environmental Systems Research (CESR), University of Kassel & Dietrich Borchardt Department of Aquatic Ecosystem Analysis, Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ

# **Technical Editor**

Ilona Bärlund Department of Aquatic Ecosystem Analysis, Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ

# **Contributing Authors**

#### Chapter 1

Deborah V. Chapman UNEP GEMS/Water Capacity Development Centre, Environmental Research Institute, University College Cork Joseph Alcamo Center for Environmental Systems Research (CESR), University of Kassel

#### Chapter 2

Jeanette Völker, Désirée Dietrich & Dietrich Borchardt Department Aquatic Ecosystem Analysis, Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ

Philipp Saile UNEP GEMS/Water Data Centre, International Centre for Water Resources and Global Change, German Federal Institute of Hydrology Angela Lausch Department Computational Landscape Ecology, Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ

**Higher Lausen** bepartment computational Landscape Leology, Heinmotz centre for Envire

Thomas Heege EOMAP GmbH & Co.KG

#### Chapter 3

Martina Flörke, Joseph Alcamo, Marcus Malsy, Klara Reder, Gabriel Fink & Julia Fink Center for Environmental Systems Research (CESR), University of Kassel

Jeanette Völker & Dietrich Borchardt Department of Aquatic Ecosystem Analysis, Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ

Karsten Rinke Department of Lake Research, Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ

#### Chapter 4

Ilona Bärlund Department Aquatic Ecosystem Analysis, Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ

Marcelo Pires da Costa National Water Agency of Brazil Upper Tietê

Prasad Modak Environmental Management Centre LLP, Mumbai Godavari

Adelina M. Mensah & Chris Gordon Institute for Environment and Sanitation Studies (IESS), University of Ghana Volta

Mukand S. Babel Water Engineering and Management, Asian Institute of Technology & Pinida Leelapanang Kamphaengthong Water Quality Management Bureau, Pollution Control Department, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Thailand Chao Phraya

Chris Dickens International Water Management Institute (IWMI), South Africa Vaal

Seifeddine Jomaa Department of Aquatic Ecosystem Analysis, Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ Sihem Benabdallah Centre de Recherches et des Technologies des Eaux, Tunisia & Khalifa Riahi Laboratory of Chemistry and Water Quality, Department of Management and Environment, High Institute of Rural Engineering and Equipment, University of Jendouba Medjerda

Gregor Ollesch Elbe River Basin Community, Magdeburg Elbe

**Dennis Swaney** Department of Ecology & Evolutionary Biology, Cornell University **Karin Limburg** Department of Environmental and Forest Biology, State University of New York College of Environmental Science & Forestry **& Kevin Farrar** NY State Department of Environmental Conservation, Division of Environmental Remediation Hudson

Joseph Alcamo Center for Environmental Systems Research (CESR), University of Kassel

#### Chapter 5

Dietrich Borchardt Department Aquatic Ecosystem Analysis, Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ Chris Gordon & Adelina M. Mensah Institute for Environment and Sanitation Studies, University of Ghana Jesper Goodley Dannisøe DHI Roland A. Müller Department of Environmental Biotechnology, Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ

Joseph Alcamo Center for Environmental Systems Research (CESR), University of Kassel

# Advisory Committee, participants of two Advisory Committee meetings March 2014 & January 2015

#### AC1 & AC2

Mukand Babel Asian Institute of Technology Peter Koefoed Bjørnsen UNEP-DHI, Denmark Deborah V. Chapman UNEP GEMS/Water Capacity Development Centre, Environmental Research Institute, University College Cork Johannes Cullmann UNESCO-IHP and German Federal Institute of Hydrology Chris Dickens International Water Management Institute (IWMI), South Africa Javier Mateo Sagasta Divina International Water Management Institute (IWMI) Sri Lanka Sarantuyaa Zandaryaa UNESCO Division of Water Science

#### AC2 only

Marcelo Pires da Costa National Water Agency of Brazil Sara Marjani Zadeh FAO

#### AC1 only

Fengting Li Tongji University, People's Republic of China
Monica Perreira Do Amaral Porto University of São Paulo
Julius Wellens-Mensah WMO Department of Climate and Water
Hua Xie International Food Policy Research Institute USA

## Reviewers

Salif Diop Université CAD Dakar, Sénégal Alan Jenkins NERC-CEH, UK Mick Wilson UNEP Chief Scientist's Office Hong Yang Eawag, Switzerland

Sara Marjani Zadeh FAO Javier Mateo Sagasta Divina IWMI Kate Medlicott WHO Cecilia Scharp UNICEF

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# Foreword: A Snapshot of the World's Water Quality "Towards a global assessment"

# Flowing knowledge

The quality of surface water in many parts of the developed world has noticeably improved in recent decades, but is being challenged as economic growth, demographics and climate change lead to widespread and severe degradation. The need to reverse this damage is reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, both as a dedicated goal and as an integral element of many others. By providing a snapshot of the current situation, this report offers a baseline to measure progress, a framework for global assessment and a pathway towards sustainable solutions that will deliver on that agenda.

With many rivers still in good condition, there are opportunities to prevent pollution and begin restoration. However, severe organic pollution is already affecting around one in seven rivers across Latin America, Africa and Asia. This poses a growing risk to public health, food security and the economy, while cultivating inequality by predominantly affecting the poor, women and children.

Freshwater systems in both developed and developing nations face growing pressure from the discharge of harmful chemicals, such as hormone disrupters. Unfortunately, municipal water treatment has become increasingly costly and developing countries in particular have problems matching expanding public water supplies and sewerage, with adequate treatment of the new wastewater flows. As a result, there is a significant risk to vital activities like inland fishing, which accounts for some 60 million jobs and almost a third of fish harvested for human consumption.

Sound knowledge is critical to understanding the underlying causes and developing the evidence based policies to improve it, including source control, waste treatment, ecosystem management and new forms of local and global governance. Yet, until now, insufficient collection and evaluation of data has made it difficult to grasp the intensity and scope of deteriorating water quality. While an overview of the situation in the Southern Hemisphere already feeds into UNEP's Global Environment Outlook, this report clarifies methodology and priorities for data collection, gaps and scale. Focussing on key hot spots, it applies advanced modelling to existing information, which will assist countries looking to establish their own planning, monitoring and guidelines.

Thanks to support from UN Water and the many contributing authors, this report will help bridge the gap between water quality, the inclusive green economy and wider development issues. I hope that by combining such a global issue with local understanding, it will provide public and private sector decision makers a practical tool to deliver on all of the water related commitments for the 2030 Agenda.

Jelin Steins

Achim Steiner, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and UNEP Executive Director



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