6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION

CASE STUDY TITLE

How Implementing the Water Footprint Standard can Raise Awareness of Water Use and Promote the Transition to Sustainable Water Usage

SUMMARY

The objective of the case study is to illustrate how the Water Footprint standard can help raise awareness on water use and water scarcity and promote the transition towards sustainable water use. To achieve the SDG 6 goal of 'universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all', we first need to thoroughly account for the ways water is currently used and polluted by human activity.

For World Environmental Day 2019, The Weather Channel (US) launched a campaign to raise awareness about water scarcity. They chose to use the Water Footprintstandard to show the staggering amounts of water necessary to produce our goods. The water footprint was applied to a selection of 100 of some of the most common consumer products available for purchase on Amazon, the world's largest online retailer. A chrome browser plug-in, an art installation and a documentary were created as part of the campaign to raise awareness on the water cost of our consumption. The Weather Channel also donated water for people in need for every online visitor who checked the weather during the campaign period.

BACKGROUND

In many cases, water is abstracted from one basin to produce goods and services which are then exported and used in other parts of the world. Some regions in the world are naturally more water abundant than others, but this becomes a problem when many of the products we trade are produced in water-stressed regions, with a large water footprint, and then exported to water abundant regions. International trade has turned local water problems into global ones and the link between point of abstraction and end user is often lost through lack of supply chain transparency. When we buy an item, we implicitly validate its method of production and the environmental impact it creates.

AT A GLANCE

COUNTRY

- United States of America

LEVEL

- National

SDG ADDRESSED

- SDG 6 - Clean Water & Sanitation

However, very few consumers are aware of the amount of water used to create the products they purchase and of the impact in the countries of production.

STRATEGY

To understand the environmental and social impacts of the water used to produce consumer goods, we first need to account for that water. The Water Footprint Assessment offers an established, scientific and internationally recognized methodology for the accounting and sustainability assessment of water consumption. It is the most complex standard available because in the accounting phase it looks not only at direct water abstraction but also at indirect use across supply chains and at water pollution.

STRATEGY

To assess the sustainability of a water footprint, the standard looks at spatial and temporal dimensions and takes into consideration efficient allocation, sustainable scale and fair distribution among all water users relying on the same water resources.

For this project, the US-based IBM, owner of the Weather Channel, and media partner The Mill chose to raise awareness about the water cost of consumption and freshwater scarcity through the use of the water footprint standard. The Water Footprint Implementation company in the Netherlands has applied the accounting methodology to deliver the water footprint values for approximately 100 common consumer products, from food and clothing to toys and household items.

To offer a striking visualization of the numbers behind the water footprint, an art installation was set up in Atlanta's Piedmont Park. The installation comprised 4 of the most popular consumer products frozen in their own water footprint, the amount of water it takes to produce them. Approximately 43 blocks of ice were used, weighing 300 pounds each (136kg). The installation attracted thousands of people and besides the frozen water footprints, it featured impact statements on water consumption and scarcity in the world.

RESULTS & IMPACT

Hundreds of people visited the art installation in Atlanta's Piedmont Park. The event was filmed and turned into a short documentary that garnered some 550,000 views and 16,000 engagements on social media. IBM also built a Chrome browser plug-in that when visiting Amazon US, it would show the water cost of an item instead of the monetary cost. This plug-in has also gathered hundreds of users.

CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNED

In accounting for the water footprint of consumer goods the main challenge is the lack of transparency in supply chains. The calculation of water footprints for complex household items where supply chains are not transparent are currently relying on the average world or regional data and are not reflective of specific models or brands. At the same time, reactions to the awareness-raising campaign and the concept of Water Footprint has raised varied opinions.

Some people are amazed to find out how much water is used to produce their daily goods and become aware of their consumption impacts, while others fail to make the link between a product consumed in a water-abundant country and the scarcity conditions under which it was made. The implementation of the water footprint standard at a large scale, under the form of a water label on consumer goods, could achieve greater awareness-raising and a shift towards more responsible consumption patterns in society.

POTENTIAL FOR REPLICATION

The Water Footprint Assessment (WFA) standard can be applied by any organization or individual looking to understand water consumption. The WFA can be applied not only at product scale, but also for businesses, river basins, countries and regions, and even the global water footprint can and has been quantified. The methodology for WFAs is publicly available in the Water Footprint Assessment manual.

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