

Maps spark concern over corporate water grab

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Go to maps [here](http://www.wri.org): <http://www.wri.org>

LONDON, July 24 (AlertNet) - As competition for clean water grows, some of the world's biggest companies have joined forces to create unprecedented maps of the precious resource that flows beneath our feet.

The Aqueduct Alliance, which allows users to create maps by combining hydrological data with geographically specific details, gives companies and investors unprecedented detail of water availability in some of the world's largest river basins.

The promoters say the data should help companies use water more responsibly while helping them to manage their exposure to risk.

But critics fear the data could be used to cash in on an increasingly scarce natural resource - two thirds of people are expected to face water shortages by 2025.

The maps, which are powered by previously proprietary Coca-Cola data collected over years of research in locations wherever the world's biggest soft drinks firm had manufacturing sites, are now publicly available for free on the Internet ([here](#)).

They allow users to create detailed high-resolution maps by aggregating and weighing indicators that drive water risk, much of it physical data but also local regulatory structures and media coverage of the issue.

Promoters and experts say communities will also be able to exploit the maps and contribute data and local knowledge so that practical solutions can be devised about how to use water sustainably at a local level.

"This goes beyond just looking at how much water is being used to produce something," said Betsy Otto, director of the alliance, launched last year by U.S.-based think-tank the World Resources Institute (WRI) in cooperation with GE, Goldman Sachs, Dow, Bloomberg and Talisman Energy.

"Our tool allows a look at the local context, to see how scarce water is in the region, what is the quality, how much competition there is for water resources," she told AlertNet.

ZOOMING IN ON RIVER BASINS

From just one map at the start, the alliance has ambitious plans to map more than 20 river basins that provide water for irrigation and industry use as well as food production.

So far it has created detailed maps of China's Yellow River and the Orange-Senqu basin, which runs through Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and South Africa.

By the end of this year it aims to have added the Colorado River in the United States, which has suffered years of drought, and the Yangtze River in China, where at least 1.3 million people were displaced by the Three Gorges dam.

Maps will also go live by year-end of the Mekong River basin in southeast Asia, which is threatened by ambitious dam-building projects, and the Murray Darling, a river at the centre of Australia's controversial water rights purchasing market.

The risk of water shortages can be projected as far ahead as 2095 by measuring 14 indicators grouped into physical, quality and regulatory/reputational categories.

Working with a Taiwan-based computer screen manufacturer, for example, Otto said Aqueduct was able to predict water scarcity by 2025 in some of the key locations used by the firm.

SUSTAINABILITY KEY

For millions of people water scarcity can have a devastating impact on livelihoods, which is why sustainable water use has become an important driver of development policy.

Some are concerned that tools such as Aqueduct's maps will simply enable companies and investors to make more money without taking local people's needs into account.

"The risk is that the concerns of local people are left behind in the rush to secure access to water and reduce risk for companies," said Lori Pottinger, Africa campaigner at International Rivers, an organization that works to protect rivers.

But experts say with more input from local communities, the risk atlas could contribute to sustainability by giving companies a different perspective on how their water use affects people living in a river basin.

A small community could use the tool to include data based on its own knowledge of local water challenges, an approach aid agencies and governments have used in participatory mapping projects with local people in many developing countries.

"This is a tool that needs to develop into something more in tune with the reality of local communities," said Vibhu Nayar, founder of the Centre of Excellence for Change in Chennai, India, which works on mitigating climate change-related water and food crises.

"If you give communities tools to draw their own maps, you will get more realistic results," said Nayar, a senior civil servant who has worked on collaborative water management with local people in Tamil Nadu in southern India.

Local community mapping projects have sprung up all over the world. Techniques range from simple hand-drawn maps to using global positioning systems (GPS), geographic information systems (GIS) and other digital technologies.

Residents of Kibera, a slum in Kenya's capital Nairobi, for example, are using GPS and open-source mapping tools to map water access points and toilets, combining valuable and unique local knowledge with technology.

Coca-Cola learned the hard way the importance of engaging with local communities.

The company had to close its plant in the Indian state of Kerala after a drought sparked criticism that it was sucking the water table dry. Coke denied the allegation but its image was still hurt.

Greg Koch, managing director of Coca-Cola's Global Water Stewardship, said it was in the company's business interest to share its water data.

In fact, one of the reasons why the Aqueduct Alliance developed the risk atlas was to help companies become more aware of the environment they operate in rather than just focusing on how they can save water, Otto said.

"We have a very robust water risk management and mapping program but when the Aqueduct Alliance came around...we realized our efforts are never going to be enough...and that you need all users in a watershed, all

stakeholders, to understand the issues and then work together to try and mitigate those risks and those stresses," Koch told AlertNet.

(This story is part of a special multimedia report on water produced by AlertNet, a global humanitarian news service run by Thomson Reuters Foundation. Visit water.trust.org)