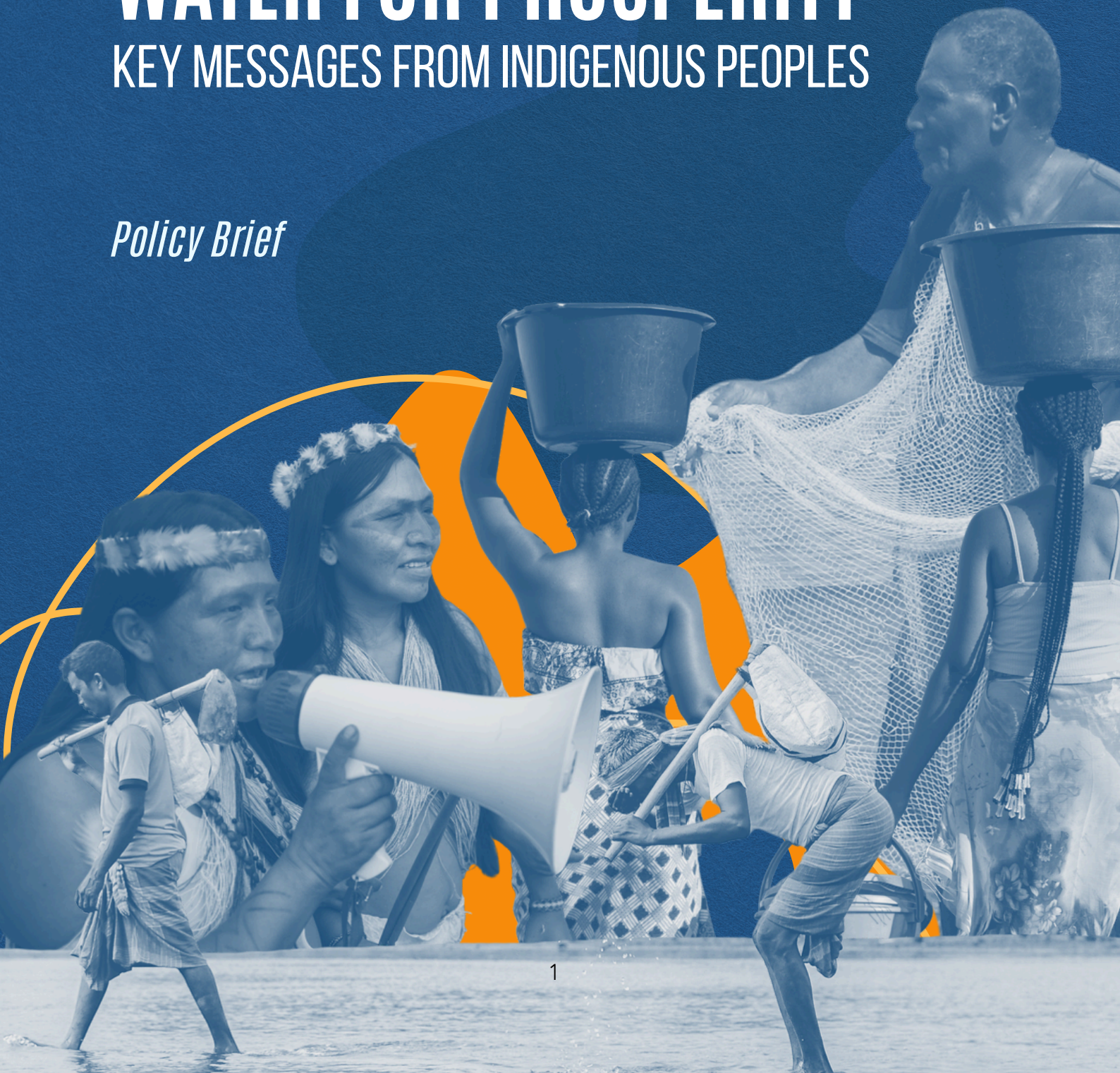
INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE 2

WATER FOR PROSPERITY

KEY MESSAGES FROM INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Policy Brief









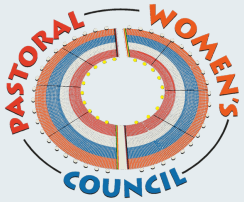




















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2026

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS



Prioritise Indigenous Peoples water-dependent livelihoods by recognising inland fisheries, estuaries, and mangroves as essential for food security, cultural continuity, and prosperity.



Ensure equitable access to water technologies and climate finance by reforming funding mechanisms and directly supporting Indigenous-led water solutions, innovations, and climate resilience.



Ensure water dialogues incorporate Indigenous Peoples' data and experiences on the cumulative impacts (social, ecological, and cultural) of mega hydropower, extractive industries, and other water-related development projects.



Broader water valuation frameworks to reflect Indigenous Peoples' perspectives, recognising water's ecological, cultural, social, relational, and intergenerational values alongside economic benefits (productivity, growth, infrastructure, investment returns)



Treat indigenous customary irrigation systems, smallholder rainwater storage and traditional fishponds as central to the water-energy-food nexus and to the meaning of equitable prosperity.



Assess productive water investments using community-defined livelihood, food-security, water-sharing and ecological outcomes alongside efficiency and economic indicators.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this early-stage policy note is to provide further guidance on perspectives, values and expectations from Indigenous Peoples regarding Interactive Dialogues and outcomes from the United Nations Water Conference due to be held in Abu Dhabi 8-10 December 2026, co-hosted by the United Arab Emirates and Senegal. The conference is convened to advance the accelerated implementation of UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 6) on Clean Water and Sanitation, with the aim of building a water-secure future for all. While many concerns included in the official record (expressed via the Summary report and Extracts) have parallels to those expressed by Indigenous Peoples organisations and allies, many other issues, especially regarding land and water rights, the inclusion and use of Indigenous Peoples' values and cosmovisions, or the application of Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and self-determination, were not

included or prominent. Given the critical role that Indigenous Peoples and their territories play in the hydrological cycle, especially as sources for green and blue water flows, this appears to be an important oversight.

Indigenous Peoples across the world are increasingly concerned about the state of water, whether locally or globally. In 2023, prior to the Water Conference held in New York, a gathering of Indigenous Peoples organizations and traditional authorities made recommendations to the water community on the protection, defence and safeguarding of the world's waters. Representatives affirmed through a Declaration "that Indigenous Peoples around the world continue to be primary actors in the care, protection and regeneration of water based on our deep and longstanding spiritual, cultural and economic relationships with water in all its forms and sources" and that "water is an inherent and inalienable right and responsibility." The Declaration included many recommendations applicable for fostering inclusion of Indigenous Peoples within global water dialogues, including:

- Recognising, supporting and respecting Indigenous Peoples scientific knowledge, cosmovision's and time-tested practices of water management and governance;
- Upholding rights of Indigenous Peoples throughout the intergovernmental system including rights affirmed in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples;

- Holding UN Member states, private companies, extractives industries, landowners and other entities accountable for failure to fully respect and implement the rights of Indigenous Peoples;

- Halting the persecution, repression and criminalization of Indigenous Peoples defending rights to land, territories and resources including water;

- Recognising and prioritising the collective human responsibility to safeguard and protect water and recognise that privatization, contamination and commodification of water are crimes against humanity;

- Establishing mechanisms and resources to ensure the ongoing active participation of Indigenous Peoples in international discussions impacting and addressing water.

Similar themes and recommendations from Indigenous Peoples were found within submissions made as part of the Second Global Online Stakeholder Consultation to inform the Concept Papers for the Interactive Dialogues and themes of critical importance to Indigenous Peoples. Based on available evidence that omitted many of their key concerns, it is unclear how the Indigenous Peoples will be included within the preparation of the Interactive Dialogue papers, especially as there seems to be limited involvement of Indigenous Peoples' organisations in the various writing groups, or in the absence of strong steps to foster their inclusion.

Under the theme, Water for Prosperity, or Interactive Dialogue 2, the covered SDG 6 targets: SDG 6.3 Improve Water Quality, Waste Water Treatment and Safe Reuse, SDG 6.4 Increase Water-use Efficiency and Ensure Freshwater Supplies and SDG 6.5 Implement Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM).

A common thread across the official documents on Water for Prosperity is the emphasis on improving water-use efficiency, increasing productivity, expanding innovation, and strengthening IWRM as pathways towards economic development, food security, climate resilience, and sustainable growth. Water is consistently framed as a strategic asset that supports agriculture, industry, energy production, urban development, and employment creation. While the submissions acknowledge the importance of considering communities in situations of vulnerability and downstream users, there is limited attention to the ways Indigenous Peoples contribute to and depend upon interconnected freshwater, estuarine, coastal, and marine ecosystems. In particular, the links between water resources and inland fisheries, estuarine fisheries, mangrove ecosystems, water-based tourism, traditional salt production, and other Indigenous Peoples' livelihoods receive little attention despite their importance for food security, local economies, and cultural continuity. Similarly, while sustainable agriculture is highlighted as a major driver of water-use efficiency gains, the contributions of Indigenous Peoples' food systems and traditional resource management practices are largely absent from the discussion.

"Indigenous Peoples' livelihoods receive little attention despite their importance for food security, local economies, and cultural continuity."

At their core, final water management decisions are often based upon the values held by the decision-making body and the perceived value of the activity compared with other activities within a governing framework. However, values in many processes are often narrowly interpreted as economic or instrumental values rather than being inclusive of a wider spectrum of values associated with water, including Indigenous Peoples' values, relational values, or intrinsic values[1]. Economic values are also often privileged over other values by decision-makers but such a narrow focus on economic values comes at a cost for nature and the poorer or politically marginalized groups that are highly dependent on nature's contributions for their well-being. Therefore, it is important that 'values' and 'prosperity' are defined to be more inclusive, which is an issue raised by many different Indigenous Peoples or allies in their respective submissions.

> "Therefore, it is important that 'values' and 'prosperity' are defined to be more inclusive."

[1] Water Governance Facility. 2023. Yaa Heen Koosge: Indigenous Peoples and Water Wisdom. (2023) Stockholm: International Centre for Water Cooperation, Stockholm International Water Institute. https://siwi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/yaa-heen-koosge-base-report_v2.pdf

A recent analysis[2] of 78 indigenous-led initiatives demonstrates that prosperity extends beyond economic returns and technical improvements in water-use efficiency. It encompasses food sovereignty, equitable access to productive water resources, cultural continuity, and ecological sustainability. Experiences from partner initiatives in agriculture, irrigation, fishpond management, and community-led energy systems highlight that efficiency improvements and livelihood outcomes can be mutually reinforcing when water governance is rooted in Indigenous knowledge, collective decision-making, and locally defined priorities. These examples underscore the importance of approaches that strengthen both community resilience and sustainable resource management.

[2] Pawanka Fund (forthcoming): Living Waters, Living Territories Pawanka Fund's Water Strategy for Indigenous Peoples Water Security and Governance.



SUMMARY/OVERVIEW OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES SUBMISSIONS

Using a similar format to that found in the Summary document, we wish to highlight submissions on topics of particular concern made Indigenous Peoples organisations. Using the keywords ‘Indigenous’ and ‘traditional’, we were able to identify key submissions and then explore the key themes of relevance to Indigenous Peoples’ in the publicly available worksheet found at:

View Consultation Responses 

THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS EMERGE IN THE SUBMISSIONS FROM INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ORGANISATIONS AND ALLIES, WHICH WE HAVE STRUCTURED TO BE THE SAME AS THE SUMMARY DOCUMENTS:

CHALLENGES

The current approach of global water governance and most tools that are used to make decisions marginalize Indigenous Peoples' and threatens long-term ecological stability through an emphasis on privileging instrumental and economic values in prioritisation. Current frameworks and tools consistently fail to include Indigenous Peoples' voices and essential Indigenous Peoples' water ethics and values, such as the responsibilities and obligations to territories embodied through stewardship, understanding water bodies as living entities, and upholding the core tenet that "water is life". Across the wider sector, there is a lack of inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in development decisions and limited opportunities for Indigenous Peoples' values to influence policy decisions. This lack of inclusion is exacerbated by the lack of legal security over land and water rights held by many Indigenous Peoples in many states.

Consequently, environmental and cultural wellbeing as a core component of prosperity is undervalued. Other challenges include increasing pressures from large hydropower development, industrial pollution, industrial agriculture, water diversions, extractive industries, and large infrastructure projects; over-extraction of freshwater; degradation of aquatic ecosystems; limited funding opportunities for community-led solutions and fragmentation of governance systems. War and armed aggression that takes place in, beside, or upstream of Indigenous Peoples' territories, often has substantial detrimental environmental, social, and cultural impact, and the capacity for securing prosperity.

SOLUTIONS

Addressing these challenges requires redefining prosperity and implementing tools that proactively include Indigenous Peoples' voices. We must widen the meaning of "prosperity" to include cultural wellbeing and actively adopt water-ethics charters. It is vital to recognize Indigenous Peoples' water rights and directly support Indigenous-led water governance, aspirations and projects. By centering Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and rights, solutions will foster sustainable water management and unlock a broader, more inclusive model of prosperity. Solutions must incorporate collaborative tools such as cultural flows for rivers (utilized in Australia and New Zealand), First Nations water policies that give effect to place-based values (Canada), and training in "two-eyed seeing" approaches.

In addition, at a global level there is a need to create measures to support enhanced inclusion and visibility of Indigenous Peoples at transboundary, national, and local levels. This includes empowering Indigenous-led water valuation through technical groups, ensuring the availability of Indigenous Peoples' expertise or supporting local Indigenous-led efforts to protect forests, aquifers and water bodies such as rivers and wetlands, and establishing an Indigenous Peoples' Forum on water with decision-making. Moreover, achieving water prosperity will depend on protecting and restoring watersheds and aquatic ecosystems, strengthening the regulation of pollution and extractive industries, and promoting integrated water-energy-food nexus approaches that recognize ecosystem connectivity, support Indigenous livelihoods, and strengthen long-term water security and climate resilience.



BEST PRACTICES:

An important value that should lead efforts is establishing that the health of a water body, whether river, wetland, coastal waters, or aquifer, is critical to defining prosperity. A healthy waterway may be the only state which addresses the broadest range of values held by the broadest range of interests. There are successful models from around the world that actively feature Indigenous-led water governance and Indigenous-run inland and coastal fisheries that can be used as examples, such as Kaipara Moana restoration from New Zealand, or efforts to build Indigenous Peoples' Food sovereignty in Mexico. Central to these partnerships or approaches is the active and fair use of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and a deep understanding of Indigenous Peoples' water ethics. Such models help demonstrate that Indigenous Peoples approaches give effect to their inherent responsibilities and obligations to the waters within their territories as part of wellbeing, recognising water resources are living entities with rights. Effective practices also include restoration of wetlands and aquatic ecosystems, accessible modern water technologies, and collaborative and multi-stakeholder water management that brings together governments, communities, mainstream scientists, and Indigenous Peoples' knowledge holders.

These examples highlight the importance of recognising customary water-allocation practices, productive landscapes, and traditional aquaculture systems as legitimate and effective components of integrated water resources management (IWRM) and water-energy-food (WEF) policy frameworks. The strategy documents local benefits and implementation experiences across different contexts; however, it does not provide a comparative assessment of economic returns or rates of return among the examples presented.

> “The health of a water body, whether river, wetland, coastal waters, or aquifer, is critical to defining prosperity.”



TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION

Transformation requires re-valuing relationships with water and remembering the interconnectedness of people, land, and waters. To ensure increased prosperity for all and shift the global paradigm of water management, Indigenous Peoples must be guaranteed inclusion in water governance decision-making bodies and through active co-management/co-design processes at local, national, and global levels, while simultaneously providing resources to support Indigenous Peoples secure their territorial rights and decision-making authority. This inclusion is essential to ensure decisions incorporate cultural, ecological, and social values, rather than being limited to instrumental economic values that favour a small segment of society over those dependent on the water body. Indigenous Peoples are not anti-development; rather, they are against systems that destroy ecosystems or diminish relationships between people and their territories in pursuit of instrumental values. They advocate for restructuring decision making processes to ensure Indigenous Peoples’ leadership and co-governance, redirecting investments toward community-led solutions, restoring degraded ecosystems, strengthening protection against pollution and extractive industries, and reforming financial and development institutions to account for a wide range of values.



SELECTED REGIONAL EXPERIENCES[3]

The following documented experiences illustrate safe drinking water, hygiene and sanitation, and continuity of household water access. They show how indigenous priorities and responses are shaped by different regional and territorial conditions.



AFRICA

KENYA

Rupa Farmers Self Help Group

used water pans and efficient irrigation systems to capture and manage water for horticulture during dry periods, helping farmers adapt to irregular rainfall.



ASIA

PHILIPPINES

Pidlisan Tribe Organization

rehabilitated the Mabileng–Oliwek communal irrigation system and its lampisa distribution network in Sagada, restoring irrigation across rice terraces covering 202 hectares and benefiting 561 families.



ASIA

NEPAL

Community Empowerment and Social Justice Network (CEMSOJ)

combined pico- and micro-hydropower with solar irrigation support for Tharu farmers, helping them manage agricultural water while reducing the burden of electricity costs.



LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

COLOMBIA

Asociación para el Futuro con Manos de Mujer (ASFUMUJER)

constructed a rainwater reservoir in Natagaima to support home gardens, agricultural plots and small-scale aquaculture, combining irrigation, reforestation and women's leadership.



PACIFIC

HAWAIʻI

Āina Momona

rehabilitated a 55-acre traditional fishpond on Molokaʻi, together with three acres of agricultural land, linking aquaculture, food systems and the recovery of ecological functions.

[3] More details found: Pawanka Fund (forthcoming): Living Waters, Living Territories Pawanka Fund's Water Strategy for Indigenous Peoples Water Security and Governance.




Land is Life