INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE 3

WATER FOR PLANET

KEY MESSAGES FROM INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Policy Brief
































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KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Advance paradigms that recognise and respect water bodies as living entities with distinctive identities and relationships within interconnected systems, and rebuild reciprocal relationships with water.

Recognise Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems that understand water as an interconnected living system, strengthening equitable, holistic, and sustainable water governance across source-to-sea contexts.

Recognise Indigenous Peoples' holistic approaches that govern interconnected land, water, forest, and coastal ecosystems in an integrated and relational manner.

Present Indigenous Peoples' case studies, good practices, and data on cumulative and compounding impacts on water quality, ecosystems, and community resilience to address evidence gaps.

Respect and implement Free, Prior and Informed Consent as well as the self-determination to protect Indigenous Peoples' waters and prevent extractive activities that threaten ecosystem integrity and resilience.

Recognise indigenous-led watershed, spring, wetland and mangrove restoration as a core part of water-related ecosystem protection under SDG 6.6 and source-to-sea approaches.

Fund long-term ecosystem stewardship, cultural monitoring and customary source-protection rules alongside restoration activities, rather than financing one-off physical outputs alone.

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 organizations 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

iincluded 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, defense 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 Planet, or Interactive Dialogue 3, the covered SDG 6 targets are: 6.3 Improve Water Quality, Waste Water Treatment and Safe Reuse and 6.6 Protect and Restore Water-related Ecosystems.

A common thread across the official documents on Water for Planet is the emphasis on the growing interconnections between water security, climate change, biodiversity loss, land degradation, disaster risk, and sustainable development. The documents consistently highlight the degradation of freshwater ecosystems, declining water quality, depletion of groundwater resources, increasing frequency of water-related disasters, and the growing vulnerability of societies to climate change impacts. They also promote integrated approaches such as source-to-sea management, whole-of-basin planning, nature-based solutions, climate resilient water management, and stronger policy coherence across climate, biodiversity, and water governance frameworks. Collectively, these discussions recognise that water is not an isolated sectoral issue but a foundational element of planetary resilience and human well-being. However, a notable gap is the limited recognition of Indigenous Peoples as rights holders and long-standing custodians of water-related ecosystems, and also the poor attention to the cumulative and disproportionate impacts of ecosystem degradation and climate change on Indigenous Peoples.

> “Water is not an isolated sectoral issue but a foundational element of planetary resilience and human well-being.”

The documents generally frame the challenge as a technical and governance problem requiring better management, finance, and coordination. However, they pay less attention to the political dimensions of water governance, including unequal power relations, accountability for environmental degradation, different value systems, and the exclusion of Indigenous Peoples and other communities from decision-making processes.

Environmental degradation and climate-related water crises are frequently described as “human induced”, yet little distinction is made between those who drive these pressures, and those who bear their consequences despite contributing little to their causes. Indigenous Peoples, despite being among the most affected communities, remain inadequately represented in the design, implementation, and monitoring of climate, biodiversity, and water governance processes. Addressing these underlying structural issues may be as important as improving water management itself.[1]

[1] Land is Life. 2026. The Systems Behind the Solutions: Indigenous Peoples’ Responses to Climate-Related Environmental Disasters. New York: Land is Life. The-systems-Behind-the-solutions-Landislife-2026.pdf



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The benefits of Indigenous-led initiatives that recognize forests, wetlands, sacred springs, mangroves, and coastal ecosystems are integral components of water infrastructure. These ecosystems sustain freshwater availability, improve water quality, conserve biodiversity, uphold cultural and spiritual practices, and strengthen resilience to climate-related risks. For this dialogue, the most relevant regional activities are the need to invest in Indigenous-led ecosystem restoration and customary water-source protection initiatives, which demonstrate nature-based approaches to water security beyond conventional drinking-water technologies or agricultural productivity interventions.



WATER HAS MANY FACES

For most Indigenous Peoples, water is understood not simply as a biophysical resource to be measured, managed, extracted or allocated, but as life, relationship, relative and, in many contexts, a living or spiritual entity. While Indigenous perspectives are diverse and differ across cultures and regions, a recurring understanding is that rivers, springs, lakes, seas, glaciers, rainfall, and groundwater are interconnected parts of living systems that sustain both human and non-human life. Water must therefore be understood through relationships and responsibilities as much as through its physical properties. In this sense, an important question is not only “what is water?” but also “who is water?” – reflecting an understanding of water as an entity with which people have reciprocal relationships. For example, recognition of the Whanganui River in Aotearoa New Zealand as a legal person provides one contemporary illustration of how Indigenous relationships with a river can be reflected in governance and law.

Such relationships can involve giving, taking, respect, care and responsibilities to maintain the conditions that allow water and life to flourish together. Sacred springs, rivers, forests and mountain watersheds may consequently be protected through customary rules, cultural practices, ceremonies and community governance, including restrictions on activities that could pollute or degrade water resources. These practices are not necessarily separate from everyday water management; they can constitute systems of ethical responsibility and stewardship that shape how communities interact with water and surrounding ecosystems.

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Water may also be understood as a common good rather than a commodity. For example, the tradition of ceseme – public springs and fountains associated with natural water resources – illustrates how access to water can be connected with public interaction, mutual support and collective responsibility. Such perspectives also challenge approaches that treat individual components of water systems in isolation: altering or extracting in one place may affect interconnected people, species, ecosystems and cultural relationships elsewhere. Bringing these perspectives into global water dialogues can therefore broaden understandings of water beyond its economic, technical and ecological dimensions, recognising water as simultaneously a source of life, a cultural and spiritual foundation, a shared good, and a relationship carrying rights, responsibilities and obligations between human more- than- human worlds.



SUMMARY/OVERVIEW OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES SUBMISSIONS

Given the lack of detail, or omission, for issues raised by Indigenous Peoples, and using a similar format to that found in the official Summary document, we wish to highlight topics of particular concern to Indigenous Peoples. Using the keywords ‘Indigenous’ and ‘traditional’ for searching the publicly available worksheet, we were able to identify the key submissions in the viewable document and then explore the key themes of relevance to Indigenous Peoples. This is the document 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

Indigenous Peoples and allied organisations highlight that water-related challenges are driven not only by climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and ecosystem degradation, but also by persistence governance and rights-based barriers. Current global water governance and management frameworks continue to marginalise Indigenous Peoples' voices and have failed to protect vital ecosystems for a number of reasons that were raised by Indigenous Peoples and allies. These include the commodification of water, where water is primarily valued as an input into industrial processes or as an interchangeable commodity or a resource rather than treating each water body as unique with its own characteristics and limitations, with each hosting different sets of land-water-people relationships. Commodification diminishes the values articulated by local communities in favour of global values that are simplified to allow for fungibility and exchange. The challenges of commodification are exacerbated by the systemic exclusion of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and the failure of water resource plans to address interconnection between water and land. Furthermore, legal protections for water bodies remain weak, and Indigenous Peoples' stewardship is historically undervalued by many institutions. Of particular concern to Indigenous Peoples is a pervasive lack of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and self-determination in water-related development supported by global institutions, or processes that limit Indigenous Peoples in decision-making spaces. At a global level, disaster responses displace communities, "green" infrastructure and activities such as mining critical minerals necessary for the green transition violates Indigenous Peoples' rights, and carbon offset schemes often result in projects within Indigenous Peoples' territories without the consent of the people living there. Similarly, war and armed aggression that takes place in, beside, or upstream

of Indigenous Peoples' territories, often has substantial detrimental environmental, social, and cultural impact. This can exacerbate existing challenges affecting Indigenous Peoples' rights and their relationship with water.



SOLUTIONS

To address multiple interacting crises, both global and local water governance must pivot toward more holistic and Indigenous-inclusive frameworks that bring a different focus to and integrated solutions for interconnected challenges. This includes addressing the urgent need to rebuild relationships with waters, transitioning away from commodity-based approaches to paradigms and approaches that respect water bodies as unique entities. Decision-making processes at all tiers of governance must advocate for, support, and increase the inclusion and prioritization of Indigenous Peoples' values and relational values, especially values such as respect, reciprocity and relationships that underpin longstanding successful stewardship of the world's waters. Water development and governance must scale nature-based solutions, including wetland restoration and watershed protection, prioritising the health of the water body. To support the transition, Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and mainstream science must work together to create viable water solutions. Place-based restoration projects should be prioritized, with Indigenous-led adaptation, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and the protection of water defenders being considered essential. Formal decision-making processes must recognize the rights of Indigenous Peoples and the special connection Indigenous women have to water. Furthermore, strictly applying Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and self-determination is critical to stopping extractive projects that would pollute and deplete local water supplies.

BEST PRACTICES:

Empowering Indigenous Peoples' yields superior environmental and social outcomes. Several Indigenous-led initiatives demonstrate the success of integrating Indigenous Peoples' knowledge into water governance, and further highlight the significance of relational approaches. These include:

Kaipara Moana Remediation (Aotearoa/New Zealand)

This Indigenous-led project demonstrates successful collaboration built around privileging Indigenous Peoples' values such as respect, reciprocity, and relatedness. In this framework, "respect" means seeing the Kaipara as a whole being rather than its components, and "reciprocity" dictates that there are obligations in the relationship between people and their waters, not just exploitative rights. Of note is the clear connection between the source and the sea.

Whiria Te Waitaki Project (Aotearoa/New Zealand

This initiative successfully unites landowners, government agencies, and families (whānau) to restore the Waitaki catchment. The program integrates Indigenous and scientific knowledge by employing whānau as guardians (kaitiaki), restoring habitats and food systems (mahinga kai), and addressing industry impacts through an integrated, holistic approach.

Legal Personhood for Rivers

An emergent best practice is granting legal personhood to rivers with the agreement and self-determination agency of Indigenous Peoples, simultaneously recognizing their collective territorial rights and traditional authorities, such as the Whanganui River in New Zealand and the Atrato River in Colombia and many other examples. This practice is recognized by the UN Harmony with Nature Programme as advancing the human rights to water and sanitation while empowering Indigenous Peoples as guardians of biodiversity.

Global Recognition of Indigenous Peoples' Stewardship:

It is a recognized best practice to acknowledge that Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6) cannot succeed without Indigenous Peoples, whose territories are home to vast amounts of Earth's biodiversity including many watersheds through traditional knowledge. States must consider Indigenous Peoples as equal partners in water governance for the planet.

A key lesson for source-to-sea action is that restoring water-related ecosystems and recognizing the customary/traditional institutions that protect them are essential to water security and should receive dedicated support and funding. Success should be measured not only by the number of trees planted or hectares restored, but also by the long-term health of springs, rivers, and coastal ecosystems, the livelihoods they support, and the cultural relationships Indigenous Peoples maintain with water.



TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION

To catalyse the necessary paradigm shift, more support for Indigenous Peoples is required, such as protection of Indigenous Peoples' territories, the adoption of rights of rivers and lakes with the consent of Indigenous Peoples, and increased formal recognition of Indigenous Peoples as subjects of international public law and rights holders. This transformative step requires the legal recognition of Indigenous Peoples' territories, the direct funding of Indigenous-led adaptation efforts, and the assurance that Indigenous Peoples help guide global water governance.

To execute this, authorities should provide necessary resources to support Indigenous Peoples, secure their territorial rights, including water, and mandate their inclusion in water governance decision-making bodies. Ultimately, this inclusive transformation will ensure that a much wider range of cultural and ecological values are incorporated into decisions, rather than limiting the future of water to instrumental economic values that favour a small segment of society over the communities that depend on the water body.



FURTHER CONTENT FROM THE REGIONAL DIALOGUES (JULY/AUGUST 2026)

Indigenous Peoples continue to be underrepresented in global, national, and local water spaces, despite being among the primary custodians of forests, water catchments, and other critical ecosystems in many regions. Indigenous communities such as the Maasai in Tanzania and the Ogiek in Kenya's Mau Forest have played a vital role in conserving biodiversity and protecting water sources for generations, to the benefit of many, including more-than-human entities. However, Indigenous Peoples contributions are often overlooked in policy and decision-making processes, despite their potential for being key partners in addressing multiple environmental challenges. Indigenous Peoples possess rich traditional knowledge for water stewardship, including cultural rituals, customary governance systems, and sustainable resource management practices that have safeguarded water sources for generations.However, this knowledge is often overlooked, inadequately documented, or shared without proper recognition, respect, or the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous communities. As a result, valuable Indigenous knowledge systems are at risk of being lost and are not being effectively passed on to younger generations or meaningfully integrated into global water governance and conservation efforts.

A major concern raised across all regional dialogues was the pollution of rivers, lakes and aquifers by legal and illegal mining activities, particularly by mercury and other heavy metals that affect human health, fishing and food sovereignty. Territorial dispossession and loss of access to water sources due to mining expansion, agro-industrial activities (such as flower farming), private property and other extractive projects was also raised. Participants also expressed concern about the increase in forest fires and the substances used to control them. According to the participants, these environmental impacts are affecting animals and, consequently, reducing hunting opportunities.

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Water gives life and is essential to our existence. Institutional weaknesses in preventing pollution, monitoring extractive activities, and ensuring the effective protection of watersheds is a danger to all. Representatives of the Indigenous Peoples of the North drew attention to the expansion of lithium, oil, gas, and other mineral extraction projects within Indigenous Peoples' traditional territories. Such projects contribute to the pollution of rivers and lakes, disruption of hydrological systems, and pose serious threats to traditional livelihoods and ways of life. Industrial agriculture such as monoculture plantations have reduced soil moisture and contributed to prolonged drought conditions, making traditional agriculture increasingly difficult. Many raised concerns over declining natural forest cover, limited access

to safe drinking water, inadequate water infrastructure, and insufficient government responses to seasonal water shortages. Several reported that infrastructure development, including the construction of roads, together with changing land use patterns, has contributed to dry-season water scarcity while increasing flood risks during the monsoon.

Participants described water governance activities as predominantly state-centred and economically framed, with Indigenous Peoples treated as stakeholders or vulnerable groups rather than being viewed as subjects of law, traditional authorities and rights holders, governance actors, custodians and key partners in addressing multiple global water challenges. Any future framework should include Indigenous Peoples from the onset of institution-building, taking lessons from other global processes to get it right. International frameworks and precedents referenced included UNDRIP; the UN system-wide action plan concerning Indigenous Peoples; current Indigenous participation mechanisms used in biodiversity, ocean, and climate processes; and the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

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REGIONAL EXAMPLES[2]

The following documented experiences illustrate ecosystem integrity, source-to-sea restoration, biodiversity and climate resilience. Together, they show how indigenous priorities and responses are shaped by different regional and territorial conditions.



AFRICA

KENYA

Save Lamu involved Bajun and Swahili community

members in mangrove restoration and monitoring, linking coastal ecosystems to fisheries, shoreline protection, water quality and long-term stewardship.



ASIA

BANGLADESH

PROVES supported Chakma, Pangkhuya, Tanchangya and Marma communities

in restoring Village Common Forests in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, including planting around 8,000 native tree seedlings to help protect local watersheds.



ASIA

TIMOR-LESTE

Centro Juventude Covalima revitalised Tara Bandu

customary law through ceremonies, local agreements and tree planting to protect forests, watersheds and sacred springs.



LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

NICARAGUA

The Gobierno Territorial Indígena de Prinzu Auya and Centro Intercultural de Innovación Tecnológica Bilwi

restored approximately nine hectares of mangroves after Hurricanes Eta and Iota, using nurseries and community restoration work to strengthen coastal protection and fisheries.



NORTH AMERICA

CANADA

Stqeeye' Learning Society

combined wetland and estuary restoration with ecological mapping and mentorship of Indigenous youth as land and water guardians.

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


BANCO
PICHINCHA
PILSENER


Land is Life