INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE 4

WATER FOR COOPERATION

KEY MESSAGES FROM INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Policy Brief





















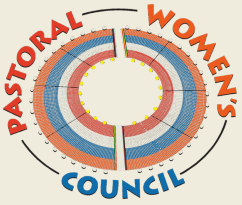











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KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS



Establish inclusive water partnerships that recognise Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and governance systems and self-determination while advancing integrated water management, cooperation, and equitable benefit sharing.



Support Indigenous-led education, training, and dialogue platforms to strengthen technical expertise, leadership, and meaningful participation in water governance processes.



Embed rights-based, gender responsive, and culturally inclusive approaches in water governance to strengthen accountability, foster trust, and promote peaceful cooperation.



Strengthen transboundary water governance through enforceable agreements, shared monitoring systems, transparent data-sharing, and early-warning mechanisms that support cooperation and accountability.



Increase dedicated financing for collaborative water governance initiatives, including Indigenous-led and community-based approaches that strengthen transboundary cooperation and sustainable water management.



Ensure recognition of customary water-sharing arrangements, community water committees and Indigenous People-Government joint management as distinct and legitimate forms of cooperation, recognising Indigenous traditional authorities including within transboundary contexts.



Provide resources and support for peer-to-peer knowledge and learning exchanges between Indigenous Peoples and catalyse documentation of river use and customary rights, while avoiding claims of formal transboundary recognition unless supported by specific agreements.

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 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 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 Cooperation, or Interactive Dialogue 4, the covered SDG 6 targets are: 6.5 (integrated water resources management & transboundary cooperation), 6A (expand international cooperation and capacity-building support to developing countries in water- and sanitation-related activities and programmes, including water harvesting, desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse technologies) and 6B (Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management).

A common thread across the official documents on Water for Cooperation is the emphasis on partnerships, scientific cooperation, data sharing, capacity building, and inclusive governance as essential enablers of sustainable water management. The documents consistently highlight the need for multi-level cooperation among governments, regional organisations, civil society, research institutions, and other stakeholders to address increasingly complex water challenges, including climate change, transboundary water governance, and disaster risk reduction. They further recognise that effective water cooperation depends on strengthening institutional arrangements, mobilising financial resources, improving data availability, and enabling meaningful participation by local communities. While these priorities are important, the documents largely treat participation as a technical or governance challenge, paying limited attention to the distinct rights, governance systems, and knowledge contributions of Indigenous Peoples. As a result, Indigenous Peoples often remain positioned as one stakeholder among many, rather than as subjects of international public law and rights holders, customary water stewards, and knowledge partners with long-standing responsibilities for the management of rivers, lakes, wetlands, aquifers, and coastal ecosystems.

> “Indigenous Peoples often remain positioned as one stakeholder among many, rather than as subjects of international public law and rights holders, customary water stewards, and knowledge partners.”

At the same time, the growing emphasis on water cooperation presents an important opportunity for Indigenous Peoples to advance their own priorities, governance systems, and knowledge contributions within emerging water policy frameworks. Rather than viewing partnerships, scientific cooperation, data sharing, and multi-stakeholder engagement solely through the lens of existing shortcomings, Indigenous Peoples could strategically leverage these processes to strengthen Indigenous-led water governance, knowledge exchange, capacity building at local, national, regional, and international levels. Opportunities exist to expand cooperation among Indigenous Peoples themselves, including through the sharing of experiences on customary water management, climate adaptation, community-based monitoring, renewable energy and water technologies, and legal approaches to securing water rights and participation in decision-making. Indigenous-to-Indigenous cooperation, including exchanges between Indigenous nations, communities, and organisations across different regions, could complement existing north-south, south-south, and triangular cooperation mechanisms while helping to address persistent gaps in technical capacity, financial support, and access to information.

> “Indigenous-to-Indigenous cooperation could complement existing cooperation mechanisms.”

[1] Goldie-Ryder. K., Hebart-Coleman. D., and Martinez-Cruz, T.E., 2024. Working Paper: Supporting the Inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in Transboundary Water Cooperation, Stockholm: International Centre for Water Cooperation, Water Governance Facility, Stockholm International Water Institute. supporting-the-inclusion-of-indigenous-peoples-in-twc.pdf

Meaningful water cooperation can build on Indigenous Peoples' existing governance systems and practices. These include customary rules for sharing water, community-led management committees, joint watershed planning, and exchanges among indigenous communities. These practices provide a strong foundation for more inclusive and effective water governance and cooperation. While they demonstrate the important role of Indigenous Peoples in managing shared water resources, they do not necessarily indicate formal recognition of indigenous authority in agreements between States or across national borders. This dialogue offers an opportunity to explore different forms of cooperation, including collaboration within Indigenous territories, partnerships with public authorities, and exchanges among indigenous communities across national borders.



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

Using the publicly available worksheet found at:

View Consultation Responses 

we wish to highlight submissions on topics of particular concern to Indigenous Peoples. Using keywords ‘Indigenous’ and ‘traditional’, we were able to identify the key submissions from Indigenous Peoples organisations in the viewable document and then explore the key themes of relevance to these Indigenous Peoples and allies.

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 primary challenge is that global and transboundary water governance systemically marginalises Indigenous Peoples' voices and concerns, with limited opportunities and resources for meaningful engagement. While there are some examples of the explicit inclusion of Indigenous Peoples' voices transboundary processes such through the International Joint Commission and the basins shared between the United States and Canada such as the Yukon River, these remain the exceptions rather than being the norm. Overall, Indigenous Peoples and their values are rarely included in transboundary processes or decision-making bodies, that are currently under state-centric and colonial governance models. A major structural challenge is that many States fail to acknowledge legal claims or governance networks that Indigenous Peoples have within transboundary bodies of water located in their territories. States, and transboundary basin organisations that are intended to coordinate transboundary activities, frequently ignore Indigenous Peoples' governance while scientific cooperation often dismisses or diminishes Indigenous Peoples' knowledge. Other challenges include limited ratification and implementation of international water conventions, fragmented governance, poor data sharing and interoperability, language and capacity barriers, and chronic underfunding of cooperative mechanisms. Unilateral infrastructure development, geopolitical tensions, militarisation, and declining trust between riparian actors were also identified as increasing risks of conflict and undermining effective cooperation. War and armed aggression that takes place in Indigenous Peoples' territories, and in many transboundary basins, exacerbates challenges affecting Indigenous Peoples' rights and their relationship with water.

SOLUTIONS

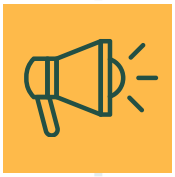
To overcome these barriers/challenges, transboundary water governance and management must transition to frameworks that proactively include and integrate Indigenous Peoples' leadership and traditional knowledge. This means that transboundary institutions must actively support Indigenous-led water governance projects and recognize Indigenous Peoples' water rights in transboundary policy. Decision-making frameworks should incorporate specific tools that increase meaningful participation, such as within monitoring such as cultural flows frameworks, recognising Indigenous Peoples' water policies, and the facilitation of "two-eyed seeing" approaches that weave mainstream approaches with Indigenous Peoples' approaches and knowledge in an equitable way. Global institutions should ensure that there is the capacity to include Indigenous Peoples' concerns within transboundary data platforms, building on outcomes from the Indigenous Navigator website for example. Efforts to support cross-border Indigenous Peoples' dialogues and cooperation promotes the vital integration of traditional ecological knowledge into transboundary science and are crucial for ensuring the success of transboundary programme. Dedicated funding must be allocated to support Indigenous leaders from each region so they can physically attend and participate in major water governance meetings. It is also important to consider interoperable transboundary data and monitoring platforms, open data-sharing mechanisms, joint monitoring and reporting systems in accessible languages for strengthening stakeholder engagement.



BEST PRACTICES:

Successful water governance that is inclusive requires moving beyond consultation toward genuine partnerships grounded in Indigenous Peoples' land and water rights, including those expressed through the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Achieving SDG 6 goals cannot succeed without Indigenous Peoples, and that the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples must be established on the basis of recognising their inherent rights and obligations regarding water within their traditional territories. Successful initiatives have created safe platforms for Indigenous women and Indigenous youth water leaders across multiple regions. Examples include the Indigenous Womens' Leadership Network based in the USA, or the Network of Indigenous Women supported by the Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact. In New Zealand, Ngāi Tahu leads extensive research projects to advance inclusive governance and progress SDG 6, and has developed strong relationships with leading academic institutes, such as Oxford and Stanford Universities, to facilitate critical water-related Indigenous Peoples' education. Effective partnerships that link local governments, youth networks, international agencies, and Indigenous Peoples advance knowledge exchange, build technical skills, and foster truly inclusive participation in transboundary water initiatives are increasing in number, but their successes and learning need to be spread much further. Effective practices also include Indigenous-led water governance initiatives, negotiated water sharing arrangements, community-based monitoring, public environmental mapping, and cross-border cooperation among Indigenous Peoples.

The selected cases highlight three complementary approaches to cooperation: (1) recognizing Indigenous Peoples' customary institutions and their role in decision-making; (2) strengthening cooperation between indigenous communities and public authorities through negotiated agreements; and (3) supporting voluntary exchanges of indigenous knowledge and experiences across countries. While cross-border knowledge sharing strengthens cooperation and mutual learning, it should not be considered equivalent to a legally binding agreement on transboundary water management.



TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION

Incremental inclusion is insufficient to address the compounded crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and water insecurity[2]. The UN and Member States must advocate for and recognize the importance of including Indigenous Peoples subjects of international public law and formal parties within transboundary water agreements, rather than merely treating them as stakeholders or not being involved at all, and integrating Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems alongside mainstream scientific evidence in water management and diplomacy. Such a transformative shift requires legally amending international water law to explicitly include Indigenous Peoples' territorial rights and traditional authorities, guaranteeing Indigenous Peoples representation within transboundary commissions or basin organisations boards and staff, and directly funding Indigenous Peoples decision-making representation transboundary monitoring. To operationalize this shift immediately, willing Member States should create a binding agreement to coastal Indigenous Peoples' governance and representation across all UN water bodies, beginning directly with the Indigenous Peoples' attending the 2026 UN Water Conference.

[2] 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

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

Regional dialogue participants emphasized that Indigenous Peoples across all regions are facing complex water crises driven by climate change, industrial development, ecosystem degradation, insufficient recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights in decision-making processes, and the impacts of armed conflict or potential for armed conflict in many locations. Across all dialogues, participants consistently identified extractive industries, hydropower development, monoculture plantations, infrastructure expansion, climate change, floods, drought, and the weakening of Indigenous governance systems, as well as self-determination, as the principal drivers of water insecurity in Indigenous territories across the region. Many of these effects, as are the solutions, were transboundary in nature. Many participants highlighted the impacts of upstream mining contamination on river flows, emphasizing that pollution affecting transboundary river systems threatens Indigenous communities' access to clean water, livelihoods, cultural practices, and the health of river ecosystems, as well as many other communities.

Drawing on the experience of Indigenous communities along a transboundary river in south East Asia, one participant detailed the importance of ensuring that Indigenous communities are meaningfully involved in decision-making, including in transboundary water governance, and that their traditional knowledge is respected alongside scientific evidence to the benefit of many. This intervention underscored the need to address water governance beyond national boundaries, recognizing that activities upstream can have significant downstream impacts on Indigenous Peoples. Participants emphasized that these challenges cannot be separated from Indigenous Peoples' rights to lands, territories, forests, and self-determined governance.

> “Indigenous communities are meaningfully involved in decision-making, including in transboundary water governance, and that their traditional knowledge is respected alongside scientific evidence.

Indigenous Peoples must be recognized as subjects of international public law, rights holders and equal partners in transboundary water governance rather than merely beneficiaries of water-related policies and programmes proposed by external parties.


CORDILLERA PEOPLES ALLIANCE
CORDILLERA PEOPLES ALLIANCE
1984
PHILIPPINES
FOR THE DEFENSE OF THE ANCESTRAL DOMAIN & FOR SELF DETERMINATION

SELECTED REGIONAL EXPERIENCES[3]

The following documented experiences illustrate indigenous institutions, negotiated sharing, joint governance and peer exchange. They show how indigenous priorities and responses are shaped by different regional and territorial conditions.



AFRICA

KENYA

Biftu Gafarsa Fodder Self-Help Group

documented traditional shallow wells and elders' dedha rules in the Chari grazing zone. Elders and traditional authorities organise livestock watering schedules and shared access, helping manage seasonal pressure and prevent conflict.



ARCTIC

FINLAND

The Veahčaknjárga Fishing Cooperative

documented Sámi fishing and water use along the Deatnu River through interviews with elders, mapping and multimedia records to support traditional rights and river stewardship.



LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN / NORTH AMERICA

GUATEMALA, MEXICO AND UNITED STATES

The Yakanal Indigenous Youth Cultural Exchange

brought together youth and Elders from three countries for practical learning on domestic, agricultural and ceremonial water practices.



PACIFIC

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

The Ngāti Porou Taiao Hub

operates through a Joint Management Agreement with Gisborne District Council on the Waiapu River catchment, supporting participation in catchment planning, monitoring and water-related decisions.

[3] Further detail can be found: Pawanka Fund (forthcoming): Living Waters, Living Territories Pawanka Fund's Water Strategy for Indigenous Peoples Water Security and Governance


Lays


Land is Life