INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE 5

WATER IN MULTILATERAL PROCESSES

KEY MESSAGES FROM INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Policy Brief





















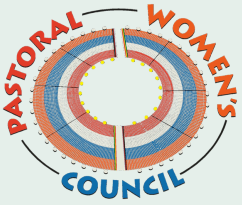











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KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS



Move beyond coordination toward transformative water governance that recognizes Indigenous Peoples' rights, leadership, and knowledge as foundational for SDG 6 implementation, and shaping post-2030 water agendas, including through supporting a global Indigenous Peoples' water institution.



Establish mechanisms to assess implementation of 2023 Water Conference commitments, with Indigenous Peoples' participation, to strengthen accountability and accelerate SDG 6 progress.



Establish dedicated Indigenous Peoples' water institutions and decision-making participation mechanisms to ensure Indigenous Peoples' rights, leadership, and knowledge guide sustainable water stewardship.



Promote locally grounded, community-driven water governance by strengthening links between Indigenous Peoples' institutions and multilateral processes beyond the 2030 Agenda.



Promote water justice by closing regulatory loopholes, safeguarding water ecosystems, and supporting Indigenous Peoples' through sustained investment and partnerships.



Develop indigenous-relevant SDG 6 evidence approaches that can recognize customary water governance, sacred-water relationships, community-defined ecosystem indicators and intergenerational stewardship.



Establish adequately resourced pathways for Indigenous women, youth and knowledge holders to shape multilateral monitoring, and require consent and community control over documentation and use of Indigenous knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this policy note is to provide further guidance on the perspectives, values and expectations of Indigenous Peoples regarding the different Interactive Dialogue topics and outcomes from the United Nations Water Conference due to be held in Abu Dhabi in 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 some concerns included in the official summaries are similar to those expressed by Indigenous Peoples' organisations, 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 were omitted, despite efforts by Indigenous Peoples. 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 UN Water Conference held in New York, a gathering of Indigenous Peoples organizations and traditional authorities from around the world made recommendations to the water community on the protection, defense and safeguarding of the world's waters. Representatives at this event 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 such as the next water conferences, 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 to those found in this Declaration were found within specific submissions made to the Second Global Online Stakeholder Consultation and were intended to inform the Concept Papers for the Interactive Dialogues. 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.

The theme, Water in Multilateral Processes, or Interactive Dialogue 5, will focus on SDG 6, the 2030 Agenda and beyond, while exploring how water is integrated across all global processes.

A common thread across the official documents on Water in Multilateral Processes is the emphasis on strengthening and institutionalising water within global governance frameworks through enhanced international cooperation, policy coherence, accountability mechanisms, evidence-based monitoring, and multi-stakeholder partnerships. Water is consistently presented not as a standalone issue, but as a cross-cutting foundation for achieving the SDG 6, climate action, biodiversity conservation, food security, energy transitions, disaster risk reduction, and broader sustainable development objectives. The documents collectively call for embedding water more systematically across multilateral processes and sustaining political momentum beyond 2030 through strengthened institutions, improved coordination, increased investment, and regular review mechanisms. At the same time, the official discourse raises important questions about whose knowledge, priorities, and experiences shape these emerging governance frameworks. While the documents place significant emphasis on monitoring, accountability, data generation, and evidence-based decision making, they devote comparatively less attention to Indigenous Peoples' rights, customary water governance systems, and Indigenous Peoples' knowledge as foundations for achieving SDG 6.

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As multilateral processes increasingly seek to integrate water across global agendas, a key question remains whether these initiatives will address the continuing loss of Indigenous Peoples' water territories, declining water quality, ecosystem degradation, criminalisation of Indigenous Peoples' water defenders, and barriers to Indigenous Peoples' participation in decision-making, or whether they will primarily strengthen institutional coordination without addressing the structural inequalities that continue to affect Indigenous Peoples and their relationships with water[1]. These concerns, raised repeatedly by Indigenous Peoples since the 2023 Water conference, remain largely unresolved. In this context, Interactive Dialogue 5 presents an important opportunity for Indigenous Peoples and their allies to assess the progress made in implementing the recommendations and commitments advanced during the 2023 conference, particularly in relation to the realisation of SDG 6 targets, the recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights and knowledge systems, accountability for water-related harms, and the effective participation of Indigenous Peoples in multilateral water governance processes.

"These concerns, raised repeatedly by Indigenous Peoples since the 2023 Water conference, remain largely unresolved."

[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



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 keywords ‘Indigenous’ and ‘traditional’ and the publicly available worksheet found at:

View Consultation Responses 

we were able to identify the key submissions from Indigenous Peoples organisations in the viewable document and explore themes of relevance to Indigenous Peoples.

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

Current multilateral agreements around water consistently fail to provide for or adequately include Indigenous Peoples, or, if included, diminish their status to being stakeholders rather than rights holders in accordance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Outside of North America in the context of water agreements, multilateral processes historically ignore Indigenous Peoples' water rights and traditional knowledge, although there are signs of change in biodiversity policy spaces or in settings such as the Amazon Basin. While it is important to acknowledge the challenges facing Indigenous Peoples, global narratives often foreground these challenges at the expense of recognizing and supporting Indigenous Peoples' water governance leadership and the positive outcomes it can generate[2]. Weak accountability for commitments made since the 2023 Water conference and insufficient financing reaching affected communities are also real concerns. Additionally, emerging risks associated with data governance, and new technologies like AI are exacerbating these gaps by excluding Indigenous Peoples' data sovereignty and failing to uphold Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) and self-determination.

[2] 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



SOLUTIONS

To build resilient water systems, the global community must formally and proactively recognize and integrate Indigenous-led approaches into multilateral governance frameworks. As part of this, global institutions must also foster normative expectations that Indigenous Peoples' involvement in global water policy is critical and necessary to addressing water challenges, as well as ensuring the appropriate recognition and use of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, cosmovisions, and governance systems in outcomes. The international community should also adopt Indigenous-specific SDG 6 indicators that formally recognize Indigenous Peoples' water rights and governance structures. This approach would ensure that multilateral processes inherently respect the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Global and national processes should also enable and implement long-term Indigenous Peoples' models, such as Ngāi Tahu's 25-year vision, Mō Kā Uri, which grounds aspirations in intergenerational wellbeing and environmental relationships. Solutions require recognizing the right of participation for Indigenous Peoples, women, and youth in policy development and water governance bodies from the local to the global level. The establishment of these platforms for dialogue is vital to ensuring a Human Rights-Based Approach, cross-cultural knowledge exchanges, and open and accessible data-sharing processes, and long-term and intergenerational governance models.

BEST PRACTICES:

Several established practices currently demonstrate the efficacy of inclusive, rights-based, multi-stakeholder water governance. Organizations such as the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC) showcase best practices by gathering grassroots testimonies about human rights violations related to water and facilitate the accreditation of Indigenous Peoples to give testimonies at high-level meetings that are critical for inclusion and to give effect to multilateral agreements. The Water Justice Manifesto, launched at the 2023 Water Conference, successfully united over 500 organizations worldwide and secured support from Indigenous Peoples and highlighted the need for broader rights-holder representation in UN-led water initiatives. Investing in the next generation of Indigenous leadership through international education, grassroots documentation of water-related human rights violations, research partnerships, and collaborations with universities and global water forums to support knowledge transmission is important. Globally, there is increasing, successful recognition of Indigenous Peoples in multilateral and regional agreements, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO), providing a blueprint that global water policy architecture and future global water governance must actively learn from and adopt.

For international water policy processes, it is important to ensure that information collected by indigenous communities contributes to monitoring and future policy decisions while respecting their rights, knowledge systems, and customary institutions, including application of FPIC as relevant. The examples below show how community-generated information can help strengthen monitoring systems and make them more inclusive and responsive to Indigenous Peoples' perspectives and priorities.

TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION

To restructure global water governance and ensure the permanent inclusion of Indigenous Peoples, the international community must help resource Indigenous leadership by creating a dedicated, international Indigenous Peoples' institution focused on water issues. This international organization would serve as a foundation and focal point for knowledge collation, distribution, and advocacy. It would directly support partnership platforms and guarantee that Indigenous Peoples' values are increasingly privileged and widely valued, and thus better included in global water governance. In addition, any multilateral agreement that emerges through the UN-Water process must specifically recognise and include Indigenous Peoples in water governance, building on positive outcomes that have emerged in other spaces such as the Convention of Biological Diversity.



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

A key topic across all dialogues was how decisions regarding water governance, conservation, infrastructure development, and land use are made by government authorities and other powerful stakeholders with limited or no meaningful participation of Indigenous communities. This includes local, regional and global policy making and decisions. Participants identified causes such as weak interaction between global water institutions and Indigenous Peoples; absence of Indigenous-led organizations from UN Water partnership; limited visibility of Indigenous stewardship and case studies around water; lack of Indigenous-specific data on access, security, pollution and project impacts; difficulties in communicating and collaborating across areas such as the Pacific due to resources and time zones; and the need for locally accessible materials, multilingual participation, sustained forums and feedback between Water and other global conferences. Such exclusion undermines Indigenous Peoples rights, knowledge systems, and traditional governance institutions.

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 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.

> “Any future framework should include Indigenous Peoples from the onset of institution-building.”

To support the implementation of a global framework on water, it is also important to establish formal, resourced Indigenous participation or an advisory mechanism within global water governance; recognize Indigenous Peoples as rights holders, water knowledge holders, custodians and governance actors; embed Indigenous knowledge and water-as-life framing across all six interactive dialogues and enable Indigenous water governance with direct access for Indigenous organizations and permanent representation in international decision-making spaces.



SELECTED REGIONAL EXPERIENCES[3]

The following documented experiences illustrate indigenous-specific SDG 6 evidence, monitoring, participation and intergenerational accountability. They show how indigenous priorities and responses are shaped by different regional and territorial conditions.



ASIA

INDONESIA

PEREMPUAN AMAN

supported Indigenous women to map water sources, forests and culturally significant sites in Rangan territory and to use that documentation in efforts to secure recognition for ancestral forests and water systems.



ARCTIC

Network of Indigenous Women in Asia (NIWA)

used feminist participatory action research to enable Indigenous women to document water knowledge, analyse local challenges and present their findings in policy settings.



EURASIA

KYRGYZSTAN

The Suuchular initiative

documented traditional freshwater knowledge from more than 220 respondents in over 20 villages, including observations of snowmelt, glacial movement and water quality.



EURASIA

ALTAI REGION, RUSSIA

Indigenous initiatives

documented and mapped sacred springs and lakes and pursued their protection through boundaries, agreements and local councils.



PACIFI

HAWAI‘I

Hui Ho‘oleimalu’s Papahana Puakahīnano

programme involved around 400 school students in hands-on fishpond and watershed restoration and monitoring with Elders, demonstrating an intergenerational dimension of water stewardship and knowledge transmission.

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




Land is Life