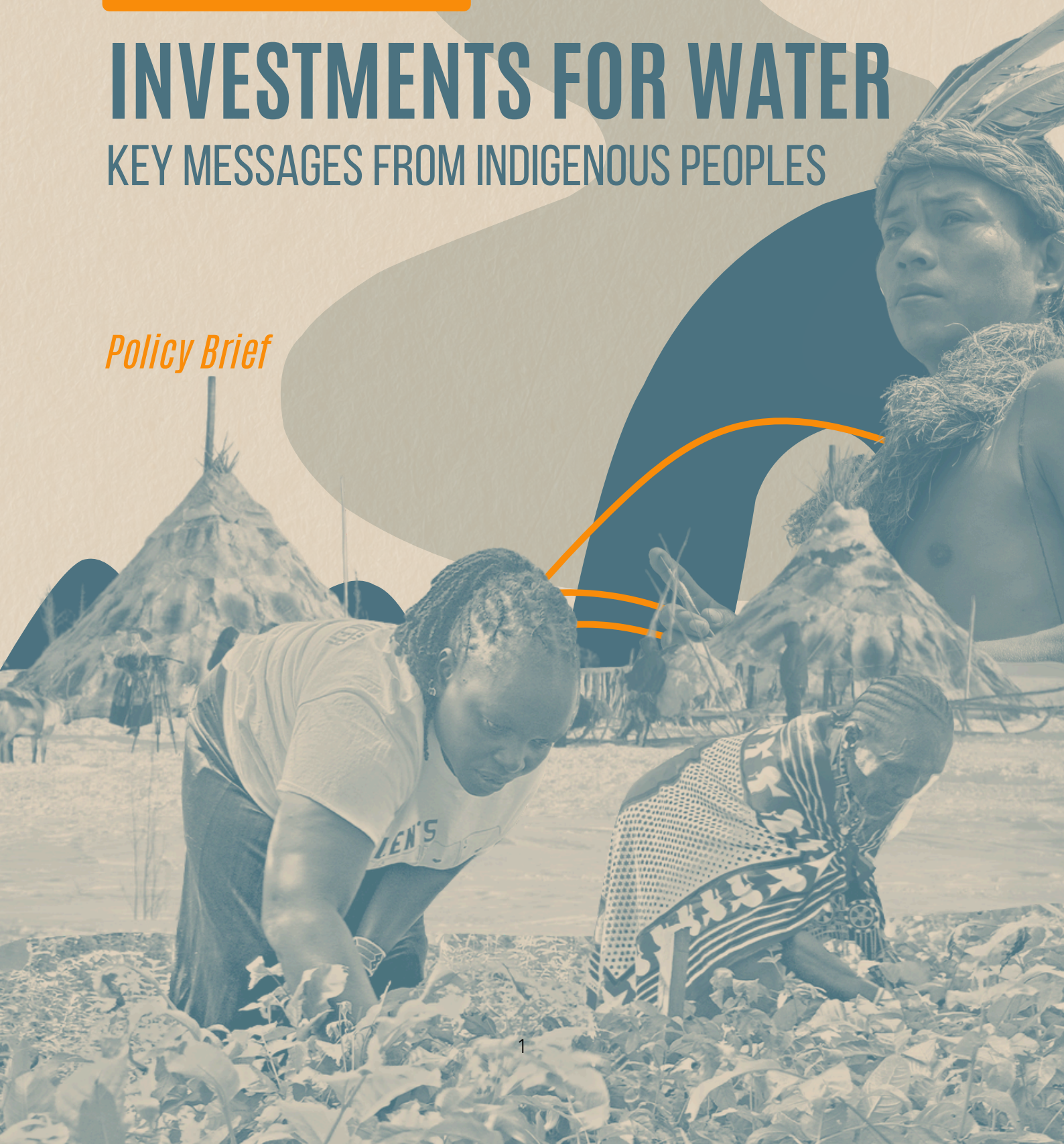
INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE 6

INVESTMENTS FOR WATER

KEY MESSAGES FROM INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Policy Brief











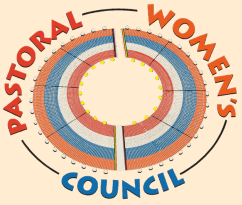






















Coordinating Authors:
David Hebart-Coleman and Johnson Jament

2026

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS



Establish mechanisms for Indigenous Peoples to participate in developing, reviewing, and monitoring dialogue recommendations, including follow-up and accountability processes.



Ensure Indigenous Peoples co-design and co-chair multi-actor dialogue processes, as equal partners with mechanisms for knowledge-sharing, partnership-building, and the monitoring of agreed recommendations.



Facilitate Indigenous-led dialogue spaces that connect Indigenous Peoples with aligned investors, scientific institutions, and technical experts to foster ethical, self-determination-based partnership building.



Ensure Indigenous Peoples and other actors jointly identify priorities and capacity needs through participatory dialogue processes that inform recommendations and follow up.



Create direct, flexible and unrestricted financing channels for Indigenous-led water systems and long-term stewardship.



Fund local technology selection, operation and maintenance, including technical leadership by Indigenous women and youth, as integral elements of investment rather than optional capacity-building add-ons.

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 the 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, 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 and self-determination were omitted, despite efforts by Indigenous Peoples to draw attention to these. 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:

- 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 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 strong steps to foster their inclusion.

Under the theme 6, Investments for Water: Financing, technology & innovation, and capacity building, or Interactive Dialogue 6, there will be particular emphasis on **the SDG 6 means of implementation targets 6.a (international cooperation and capacity building) and 6.b (participation of local communities)**, although the dialogue covers all SDG 6 targets.



A common thread across the official documents on Investments for Water is the emphasis on creating an enabling environment for accelerated implementation of SDG 6 through increased financing, improved data systems, technological innovation, institutional strengthening, and multi-stakeholder partnerships. The SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework positions financing, governance, innovation, capacity development, and data as mutually reinforcing accelerators for delivering water-related goals. While this framing appropriately recognises that investment extends beyond financial resources to include knowledge, technology, institutions, and human capacities, it largely remains grounded in state-led, technical, and market-oriented approaches to water governance. Indigenous Peoples' contributions to maintaining water-cycles, protecting watersheds, conserving aquatic ecosystems, and sustaining community-based water management systems remain insufficiently measured, valued, or reflected within prevailing indicators and financing frameworks. As a result, many of the investments highlighted in official discussions risk reinforcing existing governance structures without adequately addressing the underlying causes of water degradation, including pollution, extractive activities, and privatisation of water resources. The limited

attention given to Indigenous Peoples participation contrasts with the significant emphasis placed on private-sector engagement, despite the fact that many Indigenous Peoples' territories continue to experience chronic underinvestment while simultaneously bearing the environmental costs of unsustainable development[1]. The dialogue therefore raises important questions about accountability: whether financing mechanisms should not only mobilise new capital for water but also address the responsibility of actors whose activities contribute to the degradation and contamination of water sources. For Indigenous Peoples, this Interactive Dialogue presents an important opportunity to reshape the meaning of investment itself. The official documents' recognition of inclusive governance, Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, and multi-stakeholder participation creates space to advocate for Indigenous-led water governance, community-based financing models, and capacity building approaches that strengthen rather than replace Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems. Indigenous Peoples continue to face barriers in accessing climate finance, mainstream water technologies, research opportunities, and formal decision-making processes, even though their customary management systems often demonstrate long-term sustainability and resilience.

> "For Indigenous Peoples, this Interactive Dialogue presents an important opportunity to reshape the meaning of investment itself."

[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.

“These practices are not necessarily separate from everyday water management; they can constitute systems of ethical responsibility and stewardship.”

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

Financial resources and investments in water are not making their way to Indigenous Peoples[2]. Despite Indigenous Peoples' territories covering 25% of terrestrial land area and containing critical blue and green water sources, an estimated 0.6% of funding goes directly to Indigenous Peoples, primarily through climate change funding. International financing consistently bypasses Indigenous Peoples in favour of large infrastructure projects as opposed to strongly supporting land stewardship or local economic development. Necessary funds also fail to reach Indigenous Peoples' due to excessive bureaucracy or donor requirements that gatekeep funding opportunities. This challenge is exacerbated by investments made by external parties in Indigenous Peoples' territories that are generally executed without Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of affected Indigenous Peoples, often resulting in displacement and numerous human rights violations. A major challenge is that most development projects within Indigenous Peoples' territories are completed by external entities using external funding sources, driven by external priorities, and ignore Indigenous Peoples aspirations and leadership, even when they are the most affected. Similarly private sector or "blended finance" with financial institutions can result in water privatization and exclusion of Indigenous Peoples. Other challenges include limited technology transfer; narrowly conceived capacity-building approaches that are often reduced to technical training and overlook institutional, cultural, and governance contexts; and insufficient participation of Indigenous Peoples' in decision-making, while technology and innovation initiatives frequently fail to recognise or integrate Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems.

[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

SOLUTIONS

Addressing these structural gaps and increasing the flow of finance requires better application of FPIC, improved opportunities for direct, flexible, and sustained funding access, and, critically, a higher appreciation of Indigenous Peoples' approaches to water governance and investment. Similarly, there needs to be more value placed on the enhancement retention of land and water ecosystem services and stewardship, including recognition of cultural values that help secure these. Stakeholders and funding bodies must actively support and create processes to enable Indigenous-led institutions and proposals to secure funds at higher levels than present. This includes possibilities for direct access to financing streams, processes that are also acceptable to Indigenous Peoples, and support for community-defined development priorities. States and philanthropic organizations must strengthen direct partnerships with Indigenous Peoples to support self-determined initiatives. Global water actors must promote better interaction with Indigenous Peoples' institutions at national and local levels and share best practices in capacity development over the long-term. This requires better sensitisation of development institutions around partnering with Indigenous Peoples. Community ownership, grassroot education that also connects water educators, knowledge-sharing, and the integration of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge into water governance were identified as essential to advancing SDG 6 through self-determined, inclusive, and locally grounded solutions.





BEST PRACTICES:

Given the very low levels of investment making its way to Indigenous Peoples, it is clear there are few best practice examples to draw on that successfully merge Indigenous Peoples' aspirations or priorities with international finance options. Instead, it is important that there is recognition that land and water projects whose objectives are determined by Indigenous Peoples themselves are more successful and long-lasting than those projects whose objectives are generated and directed by external funders to meet their priorities.

Indigenous-led initiatives such as freshwater data platforms demonstrate the value of combining traditional knowledge with scientific approaches to enhance monitoring, transparency, and decision-making. Drawn on lessons from the biodiversity, climate change, and forestry sectors, including UN-facilitated mechanisms that have advanced Indigenous Peoples' participation, leadership, and knowledge systems. Apply these lessons to and use of funding for the water-related priorities and to support traditional ways of knowing and being in the respectful, responsible, reciprocal, and relational stewardship of land and waters.

Across these investments, appropriate technology can only be effective and sustainable when communities have the knowledge, skills, and authority to manage and maintain it. Funding frameworks should therefore consider not only physical infrastructure, such as water tanks, pumping systems, and storage facilities, but also community-led decision-making, management, and maintenance systems. Both are essential to ensuring long-term sustainability.

TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION

To achieve a fundamental paradigm shift in water governance and reallocating financial flows to support critical natural assets, new funding mechanisms to establish direct, equitable investment pathways for Indigenous Peoples must be created[3]. The mechanisms should address the following components:

- Direct Financing to Indigenous Peoples, including Indigenous-managed water funds and self-determination mechanisms, and dedicated funding windows within existing financing streams.
- Eliminating or reducing conditionalities that undermine self-determination and traditional authorities, while minimising barriers that prevent Indigenous Peoples from accessing resources and decision-making spaces.
- Applying long term financing strategies that secure land and water services through capacity development, innovation, and leadership, recognising that transformative change requires sustained investment beyond short-term project cycles. Increasing Indigenous Peoples presence within global financial institution decision-making bodies and the technical experts that provide guidance for decision-making.
- Recognise Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems as valuable sources of innovation, increase support for locally-led solutions, and create inclusive platforms that guarantee Indigenous Peoples a meaningful voice in water governance.

[3] 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)

Securing adequate financial resources to support Indigenous conceived and led programmes was raised across all of the dialogues, Participants agreed that there needs to be guaranteed direct, flexible unconditional and long-term financing mechanisms for Indigenous organizations that carry out actions for the conservation, monitoring and restoration of water ecosystems, but in accordance with their traditions as opposed to simply being an instrument or a side activity of external parties that provide finance.

Participants regularly mentioned how the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and self-determination were not consistently applied in water-related projects, natural resource management, or research involving Indigenous Peoples or their territories. Many projects, whether local or regional in scale, are carried out without the involvement of Indigenous Peoples, despite them often being amongst the most affected or the benefits accruing elsewhere. In some cases, information, traditional knowledge, or data are collected from Indigenous communities without their full, informed, and voluntary consent, and are subsequently published or used without appropriate recognition or benefit sharing.

institutions to develop appropriate policy and safeguards, these were inconsistently applied, seen as tokenistic, or discarded when proven to be inconvenient to a project sponsor. Any future global framework on water needs to ensure that FPIC is applied more consistently as part of project and programme funding.

> “The principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and self-determination were not consistently applied in water-related projects.”



SELECTED REGIONAL EXPERIENCES[4]

The following documented experiences illustrate community-selected technology, maintenance, funding pathways and institutional capacity. Together, they show how Indigenous priorities and responses are shaped by different regional and territorial conditions.



AFRICA

NIGERIA

Fulbe Development and Cultural Organisation (FUDECO)

installed solar-powered boreholes serving 750 members of the Mbororo community in Borno State. The water also supports household gardens, alongside training on management, irrigation and livestock care.



LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

ECUADOR

Kichwa communities

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

SURINAME

The Mulokot Foundation

introduced solar-powered pumping and filtration for a remote Wayana community facing drought and mining-related water contamination, and trained Indigenous women in installation, operation and maintenance, strengthening their leadership.



NORTH AMERICA

UNITED STATES

Sogorea Te' Land Trust

established the Himmetka hub in East Oakland with rainwater catchment, storage and filtration linked to food gardens and emergency supplies.



PACIFIC

AUSTRALIA

Indigenous Lawyers Association of Queensland

installed 44,000 litres of storage capacity and under-surface drip irrigation at Sandy Bore, supporting bush-food horticulture, water efficiency and cultural camps.

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




Land is Life