



# Indigenous peoples

Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities suffer disproportionately from economic, social and political marginalization and human rights violations, including poor access to water and sanitation services. As custodians of many of the world's most fragile and important ecosystems their knowledge and participation is essential to ensure respect for their rights and to achieve equitable and sustainable water management.

**About indigenous peoples** | Indigenous peoples live in more than 90 countries in all inhabited continents, comprising approximately 370 million individuals of more than 5,000 distinct peoples. Most indigenous peoples originate in developing countries, but there are also several living in Europe, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the US (UNDESA, 2009).

Indigenous peoples maintain unique social, economic and political systems shaped by languages, cultural practices, religious beliefs and knowledge systems that are distinct to the dominant society (Martínez Cobo, 1986/7). Many indigenous peoples' determination to sustain and develop their societies as sovereign peoples and long historical connection to specific territories, frequently biodiversity hot-spots, gives them an exceptional position as custodians of some of our most important and fragile ecosystems (WWF et al., 2005).

**Marginalization and multidimensional poverty** | Historically indigenous peoples have faced systemic discrimination and exclusion from political and economic power, and they continue to face the consequences of this marginalization. Despite constituting only 5 per cent of the global population, indigenous peoples make up 15 per cent of people living in poverty and they disproportionately suffer from illiteracy, disease, infant and maternal mortality and have a shorter life expectancy (Gracey & King, 2009).

Indigenous peoples' rights are recognized in several international legal instruments such as the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN, 2007) and the ILO convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal peoples (ILO, 1989). Further, the Human Right to Water and Sanitation is based on clauses about non-discrimination (UN, 2010). Despite the international support, many countries still have not recognized and integrated indigenous peoples' rights in their national legislation. The absence of systematic information on indigenous peoples' health, income, and access to services is to a great extent a consequence of many countries refusing to officially recognize their indigenous peoples. But even in countries where they are recognized, the effective realization of their rights is elusive and indigenous peoples face barriers to equal participation in democratic processes and decision-making influencing their lives and livelihoods (Morse, 2009).

**Access to WASH services** | While most countries lack comprehensive data about indigenous peoples' access to water and sanitation services, research shows that indigenous peoples systematically have lower levels of access than the rest of the population (Jiménez et al., 2014).

Poor understanding and recognition of indigenous peoples' institutions, governance systems and worldviews result in less effective and sustainable water and sanitation service provision

to indigenous peoples', (Tinoco et al., 2014). Looking at rural communities some of the main challenges are:

- Clashes with cultural preferences and views on health leading to rejection of solutions
- Failure to acknowledge local knowledge about environmental conditions causing malfunctioning services
- Imposition of new unsustainable water governance organizations which become inactive due to lack of legitimacy and capacities
- Failing infrastructure due to absence of control and monitoring.

Even if governments and development organizations recognize the importance of working in a culturally sensitive way and facilitating the participation and empowerment of indigenous communities, the majority lack comprehensive strategies which often makes the intercultural work ad hoc and project specific (Jiménez et al., 2014).

**Custodians of knowledge and holistic management practice** | As a result of many indigenous peoples' historical connection to specific territories and preservation of lifestyles that often depend on the local environment they tend to have deep knowledge of the natural resources, including the water resources, in the areas where they live. Complex systems of water harvesting, conservation and management have often been developed in parallel with conflict resolution mechanisms rooted in indigenous peoples' collective responsibility to protect the water resources for future generations (WWF et al., 2005).

As indigenous peoples' relationship to water often is strongly connected to the spiritual world, with water seen as a sentient being, their management systems look to balance immediate and future human needs with those of plants, animals and spirits based on traditional ecological knowledge and principles and practices (Finn & Jackson, 2011). Thus, sustainable and culturally appropriate water services and conservation and management systems can be developed more effectively by recognizing and including indigenous peoples' knowledge, practices and institutions within them.

**Water conflicts with industrial water users** | The combination of their marginalization and settlements often being located in areas rich with natural resources has led to suffer disproportionately from large scale water related development projects, such as dams and mining. The projects threaten their livelihoods as they change the water flow, damage ecosystems, reduce quality and quantity of drinking water, and generate social disrupt and conflicts by violating rights and introducing for example drugs.

When a large scale water related investment is approved indigenous peoples are often not consulted or lack the means to promote their interests. Resettlements can provoke traumas over several generations as a result of the social and cultural loss caused by the rupture of identities related to a specific territory (Andre, 2012). The violent phase many water conflicts go through have on numerous occasions led to physical confrontations and at times deaths (Jiménez et al., 2015).



Indigenous peoples' efforts to exert their rights and make their voices heard have increasingly become more effective at stopping, suspending and renegotiating large water development projects, with substantial economic effects for the responsible companies or governments. Increasingly industrial actors and governments are exploring avenues for cooperation. The Joint Management Agreements (JMA), implemented in New Zealand, is one examples of a model for co-management of rivers or transfer of powers from local authorities to tribes (Aho, 2009). Adaptive governance mechanisms, hybrid governance institutions, social and cultural impact assessments and deliberative and visualization tools are also used to integrate indigenous peoples' knowledge, values and interests into water management.

There is still a long way to go before indigenous peoples' rights and interests are recognized on par with other water users.

**Our response** | Both UNDP and SIWI consider the realization of human rights key to a sustainable and equitable allocation, management and use of our global water resources. Given that indigenous peoples are politically, socially and economically marginalized, suffering disproportionately from human rights abuses and poverty, strengthening the knowledge about and position of indigenous peoples in water governance processes is a central goal to the WGF. We strive to:

- Contribute to the knowledge about the links between indigenous peoples' rights and sustainable and equitable water governance through applied research
- Facilitate dialogues and increase the awareness about in-



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indigenous peoples and water by linking actors and building partnerships

- Support improved water governance and programming by developing and promoting intercultural approaches
- Provide technical support to development actors on the implementation of respectful and inclusive water governance processes.

Based on the participatory research of the project Towards Transcultural Transparency, carried out in collaboration with the MDG-F and URACCAN, UNDP Water Governance Facility at SIWI (WGF) has formulated recommendations on how rural WASH projects can effectively integrate an intercultural approach with the aim of generating more sustainable and cost-effective sanitation and water services, designed and operated in a way that meets the needs and aspirations of indigenous peoples. The recommendations are currently being tested in the GoAL WASH project in Paraguay in collaboration with the Institute for Indigenous Peoples.

During 2014 WGF conducted a global mapping of water conflicts between industrial water users and indigenous peoples. The results of the mapping were presented in a World Water Week seminar co-convened with the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs. Currently cases of successful collaboration between industry and indigenous peoples are being explored.

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## The UNDP Water Governance Facility at SIWI (WGF)

The UNDP Water Governance Facility at SIWI (WGF) is a collaboration between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI). The WGF provides strategic water governance support to low- and middle-income countries to advance socially equitable, environmentally sustainable and economically efficient management of water resources and water and sanitation

services. The ultimate aim is to improve lives and livelihoods and reduce poverty, inequalities and exclusion. The WGF forms part of the UNDP Water and Ocean Governance Programme (WOGP) and receives financial support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

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