

## Useful Links

UNESCO – IHP Water and Cultural Diversity Project: [www.waterandculturaldiversity.org](http://www.waterandculturaldiversity.org)

UNESCO-IHP: [www.unesco.org/water/ihp/](http://www.unesco.org/water/ihp/)

UNESCO – World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP): [www.unesco.org/water/wwap/](http://www.unesco.org/water/wwap/)

UNESCO – Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS): [www.unesco.org/links](http://www.unesco.org/links)

UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity: [unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001271/127160m.pdf](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001271/127160m.pdf)

UNU-IAS Traditional Knowledge Initiative, Water Programme: [www.unutki.org](http://www.unutki.org)

Research Institute for Humanity and Nature (RIHN): [www.chikyu.ac.jp](http://www.chikyu.ac.jp)

Global Water Partnership (GWP): [www.gwpforum.org](http://www.gwpforum.org)

Indigenous Water Initiative and Kyoto Declaration: [www.indigenouswater.org](http://www.indigenouswater.org)

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

[www.unesco.org/water/ihp](http://www.unesco.org/water/ihp)

<http://typo38.unesco.org/en/themes/ihp-water-society/water-and-culturaldiversity.html>

Contact:

[wcd@unesco.org](mailto:wcd@unesco.org)

[lhiwasaki@unesco.org](mailto:lhiwasaki@unesco.org)

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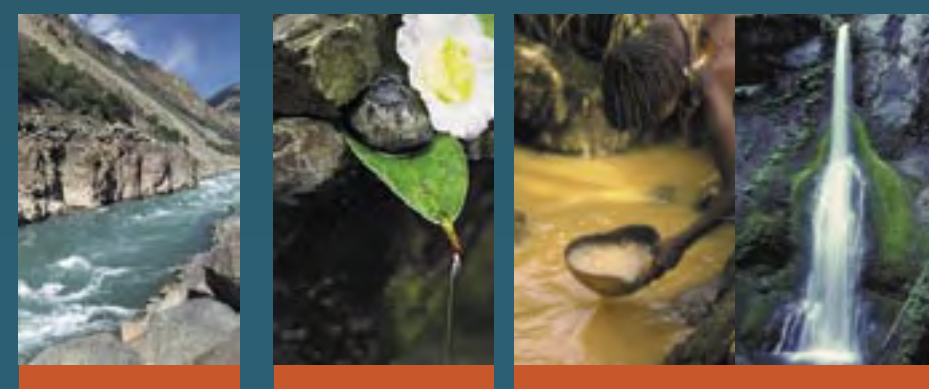
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# MAINSTREAMING CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN WATER RESOURCES MANAGEMENT A POLICY BRIEF



*Water is the essential lifeblood of our planet, with the power to generate, sustain, receive, and ultimately, to unify life.*

A broad range of human uses and transformations of the planet's resources is generating global climatic and environmental changes that are profoundly challenging the sustainability of our water systems, and hence, the sustainability of all life, and ways of life, on earth.

## CULTURAL DIVERSITY IS THE KEY TO SUSTAINABILITY:

It provides the multiple human possibilities necessary for us to adapt to environmental changes and, in turn, shape the process of change for sustainability.

Thus, it is imperative to bring an active recognition of, and respect for, cultural diversity into mainstream water resources management, to ensure the sustainability of both water and cultures.

**SUSTAINABLE WATER RESOURCES MANAGEMENT** is crucial to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

To manage water sustainably, it is necessary to address not only science and engineering issues, but also, the complexity of social, economic, cultural and political issues surrounding water.

Many countries have adopted integrated water resources management (IWRM), which takes an ecosystem perspective of water together with its human uses; encourages broad stakeholder participation; and stresses that water, in all its competing uses, must be valued as an economic good.

Yet 'sustainable management' remains elusive. Despite huge investments in the water sector, local situations have not significantly improved, as practice lags behind theory. Many human factors – especially the cultural processes that drive actual attitudes and behaviours in specific contexts – are inadequately reflected in IWRM.

In the past decade there has been increasing recognition that cultural diversity and biodiversity are intimately interdependent, such that both must be protected to achieve sustainability; and that people's resource and cultural rights, especially those of the indigenous peoples who

are stewards of nature in the world's most bioculturally diverse regions, must be protected as inalienable human rights.

Nevertheless, indigenous and other marginalized groups continue to be disproportionately threatened by alterations to the integrity of the waterways on which their livelihoods and wellbeing depend, and by erosion or extinction of their cultures due to water development schemes over which they have no control.

**There is an urgent need to interweave cultural diversity into IWRM, beginning with a foundational discussion of the diversity of cultural perspectives on what water is, followed by whole system analysis of the links between cultural diversity and water, and their practical implications for sustainable water management. Just as the ecosystem perspective engendered the concept of IWRM, a cultural diversity perspective of water issues can provide the missing link to make the concept of IWRM truly operational.**

UNESCO introduced the theme of 'Water and Cultural Diversity' into international discourse in 2000, to promote the mainstreaming of cultural diversity in IWRM and thus, facilitate progress toward achieving the MDGs. The UNESCO-International Hydrological Programme (IHP) launched the Water and Cultural Diversity Project in 2007 to accelerate comprehensive assessment of existing research and case studies, foster interdisciplinary and multi-cultural research and partnerships, and link worldwide activities dealing with this theme.

## The evolution of UNESCO's Water and Cultural Diversity theme

- 2000 Session on 'Water and Indigenous People' at the 2nd World Water Forum
- 2003 Series of events on water and cultural diversity at the 3rd World Water Forum, with the French Water Academy and Japan Centre for Area Studies/ National Museum of Ethnology
- 2005 Sessions on culture and water at the international symposium on 'Conserving Cultural and Biological Diversity: The role of sacred natural sites and cultural landscapes'
- 2006 World Water Day on the theme of water and culture, and a session on 'Water and Cultural Diversity: Mediating for sustainable development' at the 4th World Water Forum, with the Japan Consortium for Area Studies and National Institute for the Humanities, Japan
- 2007 Launch of the Water and Cultural Diversity Project by the UNESCO-IHP
- 2008 Establishment of the Expert Advisory Group on Water and Cultural Diversity and an online database for the project
- 2009 Sessions on 'Water and Culture' at the 5th World Water Forum

International Hydrological Programme  
Division of Water Sciences



## HOW CAN WE WORK TOGETHER

to let the full spectrum of perspectives on environmental adaptation and change flow into innovative and inclusive ways to sustain both water and cultures?

Our attitudes to water and ways of dealing with water issues are mediated by a **diversity of cultural meanings, values and perceptions of water**, which shape our behaviour and motivate us toward or away from sustainable use. By recognising, respecting and interweaving multiple ways of understanding and valuing water (including but not limited to its economic value) we are far more likely to treat water respectfully and use it sustainably.

- **Acknowledge** that cultural rights are inalienable human rights, and that true sustainability requires respect for the water rights and cultural values of indigenous peoples and local communities;
- **Encourage** the celebration of diverse cultural perspectives on water through songs, stories; designs, dance, music, sports, festivals and multimedia;
- **Promote** sustainable architectural and urban design that celebrates local community relationships with water;
- **Identify** and protect sacred water sites;
- **Fund** applied research to document the different ways in which water is valued in diverse settings and the impacts these values have on water usage;
- **Produce** research-based toolkits for identifying and fostering values that can motivate sustainable water use in particular contexts, and for diffusing these values beyond their original contexts;
- **Involve** peoples of diverse cultures in workshops to envision inclusive, culturally sensitive ways to sustain water resources and ensure their ideas inform government policymaking.



## HOW CAN WE INTEGRATE

scientific and traditional ways of knowing to facilitate sustainable water resources management solutions?

Water users worldwide continue to develop **cultural practices and technologies that affect water** in accord with their cultural priorities and in response to changing environments. The increasing vulnerability of water resources calls for diverse new approaches to water management to be discovered and promoted. Indigenous and local communities are invaluable partners in this regard: their practices constitute a vast body of resources for excellence and innovation.

- **Recognise** the value of diverse cultural practices in water management and the ownership of traditional and local knowledge by specific cultural groups;
- **Document and promote** effective traditional water-management mechanisms for responding to climate and ecosystem changes, such as seasonal water fluctuations and water-related disasters;
- **Combine** science and ICT with traditional ecological knowledge and practices to deepen understanding of watersheds and water systems;
- **Co-design and co-develop** strategies that combine traditional and scientific practices to achieve sustainable water management;
- **Develop** guidelines for incorporating cultural practices and technologies into water management;
- **Fund** capacity workshops, with wide representation of water users of different cultural groups, to develop culturally sensitive methods of understanding, using, managing and conserving water;
- **Take into account** the cultural significance and impacts of the practices and technologies used by diverse cultural groups in planning and monitoring water resource use and development.



## HOW CAN GOVERNMENTS

create enabling environments for national and local water governance regimes in which diversity and adaptive capacity can flourish?

Local water practices do not exist in a vacuum, but are embedded in specific social-ecological systems governed by organizational mechanisms that contribute to maintaining adaptive capacity in the face of change. When water resources are brought under centralized, bureaucratic control, the resilience of local governance is diminished. We must re-embed the **social, cultural, political and institutional aspects that govern water use** in local contexts to enable sustainable water resource governance.

- **Analyse** water laws to identify elements concerning cultural / livelihood rights that can be strengthened; contradictions between customary and modern law that should be removed;
- **Bring** previously excluded stakeholder groups and their water-resource governance institutions into the decision-making process;
- **Identify, document, and promote** effective traditional water-governance mechanisms for adapting to climate and ecosystem changes;
- **Reform** national and local water policy and laws to formally recognise local water-related governance institutions and customary and informal norms of diverse cultural groups;
- **Adapt** local and national level government structures related to water management to accommodate existing traditional leadership structures and institutions;
- **Establish** national-local partnerships to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of reformed governance structures in promoting the long-term sustainability of water and cultures;
- **Add** an explicit concern for cultural diversity to existing social and environmental safeguards.



## HOW CAN WE USE OUR DIVERSITY

to reduce conflict and optimise collaboration?

Our collective needs for water form a basis for both **collaboration and conflict related to uses of, access to and control over water**. Multi-levelled collaboration is required to build and manage large-scale water supply, hydroelectric energy and transfer systems. Such endeavours often support national and international interests while adversely affecting upstream and downstream communities – typically populated by indigenous and other marginalized groups – leading to conflicts as various actors struggle over their rights. Realisation of the MDGs depends on our ability to optimise collaboration among all concerned.

- **Commit** to transparent, participatory communication and decision-making processes as a prerequisite to collaborative water policy;
- **Identify and recognise**, through processes of multi-stakeholder analysis, all groups with legitimate stakes in water resources in a given area;
- **Explore and communicate** the unique perspectives on water held by these stakeholders, to build mutual respect for diversity as a base for mediating any conflicts among them;
- **Develop** holistic damage valuation strategies to ensure past losses are acknowledged and not repeated, and foster transitions to sustainability using criteria defined by the people concerned;
- **Ensure** all water development schemes reflect UN principles on cultural diversity and rights, and guarantee the means of resident peoples to enjoy healthy, dignified, self-sufficient ways of life;
- **Establish a Global Water Centre**: a rights-protective, neutral space based on water-first principles, to facilitate meaningful solutions to water grievances;
- **Build a global network of water caretakers**, trained to monitor watersheds, educate water users, and mediate and remediate water disputes within and between nations.

