



## Towards Equitable Water Governance

■ A woman in Zambia collecting water.  
© Neha Mungekar.

### KEY POLICY MESSAGES

- Global water scarcity is fundamentally about water injustice.
- Water management reflects entitled beliefs and values.
- Access to, use and control of water is currently unjust and inequitable.
- Change requires drawing on the knowledge of those experiencing injustice and improving their access to water.

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## GLOBAL WATER SCARCITY IS FUNDAMENTALLY ABOUT WATER INJUSTICE

The more than one billion people who lack adequate access to water suffer primarily not from drought or governance failures but from injustice in the allocation of clean water.

Water brings with it social power, viable livelihoods, healthy bodies, transformed landscapes, energy generation, wealth, hope, and life itself. Control over water often affords individuals and groups significant social and economic power that is reflected in the monetary value of water. The flip side is that those without that control are easily marginalized.

Equitable water allocation is a more promising approach to resolving the global water crisis than simply providing more water. We should raise living standards, revive rural communities, support local knowledge and institutions, and recognize productive uses of water for livelihoods and the environment.



## WATER INEQUITY SHAPES SOCIETY

Unjust allocation of water reflects inequities and injustices in other areas:

1. **Water flows to power.** For instance, owners of deep bore-wells can draw down the water table, depriving nearby poorer communities that depend on shallow bore-wells and hand pumps.
2. **The unentitled are excluded as a matter of practice.** For example, areas predominantly inhabited by unfavored racial, ethnic and economic groups receive less water for daily use and are excluded from piped water and sanitation networks.
3. **Water struggles exacerbate gendered injustice.** Insecure water access keeps women and children in poverty in many countries. They spend so much time transporting water that they miss out on education and other opportunities to raise their standard of living and realize their potential, freedoms and capabilities.
4. **Legal authority is selective.** Different users and uses of water have different legal statuses. For instance, mining is given preferential allocation over downstream villages, who suffer from degradation and contamination of water sources.
5. **Technocrats frame water management.** Certain solutions are favored over others. For example, water management is treated as a technical question to be addressed by engineers and officials, excluding the goals, views, and expertise of diverse water users.

■ Women fetch water from a dug-well during summer of 2016 in Manyali village, Maharashtra, India.

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## CHANGE THE WAY WATER IS VIEWED

Water, like money, circulates, is exchanged, stored, invested in and desired. It flows across space and time, all the while conveying and defining social power. Like money, access to water is a prerequisite for many people to achieve a better life.

Water justice starts with taking seriously the many manifestations of injustice, from brutal water grabs to the subtler politics of normalizing inequitable practices. It involves critical questioning of 'official water truths' and their claims to rationality, efficiency, democracy and equity.

## GOVERN TO PROMOTE JUSTICE, NOT ENTRENCH INEQUITY

Formal law and water rights are often clear and fairly progressive, but daily, lived experience is at best an imperfect reflection of legal ideals. In practice, water flows to the powerful and the privileged, entrenching wealth and political influence.

For example, market-oriented discourses create rankings of water uses and users according to specific calculations of efficiency. 'Modern' users such as agribusiness firms growing high-value export crops, private water companies, and mining and hydropower conglomerates become ideals of water use efficiency and market rationality.

Indigenous practices are often suppressed by governments that ignore vulnerable communities' rights and knowledge in the name of production and efficiency. People who use traditional irrigation systems to grow their own food are seen as 'backward', and water scarcity is invoked to justify dispossession, displacement, assimilation or 'modernization'.

Contemporary water policies and legislative measures risk further widening the gap between the water 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Water justice necessitates broadening political participation, extending citizenship, guaranteeing democratic rights and recognizing cultural differences.

## BRING EVERYONE TO THE TABLE

Equitable water access, distribution, use and conservation requires us to consider how decisions are made, by whom, at what geographical scales, and for whose benefit. Local governance plays an important role in engaging community institutions to manage water effectively.

Expanded stakeholder participation contributes to effective buy-in, monitoring, regulatory compliance and environmental stewardship. It can lead to improved confidence and self-reliance in marginalized communities, promoting their involvement in other democratic processes.

■ Decades of reckless oil extraction in the Ecuadorian Amazon have resulted in a public health crisis among the region's indigenous communities, like the Kofán, whose waterways have been contaminated.  
© Amazon Frontlines.



■ Safe & Affordable Drinking Water rally in Sacramento in 2018.  
© Community Water Center

## THE SANTA CRUZ DECLARATION ON THE GLOBAL WATER CRISIS

On 22–23 February 2013, a diverse, interdisciplinary, international team of 38 social scientists and scholar-activists with expertise in water management, governance and access gathered at the University of California, Santa Cruz for a workshop on water justice and equity that culminated in the ‘Santa Cruz Declaration on the Global Water Crisis. The declaration recommends:

1. **Policy dialogue.** Engage diverse stakeholders, including those experiencing injustice, to examine water inequities and opportunities for collective action by government and judicial process.
2. **Local action, social mobilization and democratic assessment.** Mobilize marginalized households, environmental justice organizations and grass-roots groups to question and protest water inequity.
3. **Academic and journalistic investigations.** Examine the implications of established as well as new infrastructure and institutional boundaries. Expand the discourse on inequitable water access to include multi-scalar processes and geopolitical, trans-border challenges.

## TAKEAWAY POINTS

### Water justice requires

- engaging with those who experience injustice;
- linking water redistribution with demands for cultural recognition;
- improving political participation by marginalized groups; and
- addressing water injustice in its diverse circumstances and scales.

### A few examples of water injustice

- Young girls in rural Nepal risk assault carrying water barrels up long mountain trails at night because climate change and hydroelectric projects have made village taps unreliable.
- People bathe in a toxic river in Cambodia.
- Most residents of Dar es Salaam lack access to piped water because they live in informal settlements.
- Multinational agribusiness companies divert water from indigenous Andean communities to grow asparagus in the Peruvian desert for export.
- Low-income communities in California’s Central Valley pay high prices for contaminated tap water, and buy bottled water to drink, while canals convey clean water past them to entitled large commercial farms, cities and environmental flows.

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*The guiding spirit of this work was Prof. Ben Crow (1947-2019). This policy brief is dedicated to his memory.*