

---

## SEP Appendix E3: Water justice

Water resources management, today, primarily is about the interdisciplinary question of how to conserve, allocate and organize water among competing uses and users. Water's decreasing availability and quality, and its unequal distribution, lead to growing pressures on society and nature, threatening future availability and intensifying conflicts. At the same time, the water pollution problem is growing and, partly triggered by climate change, vulnerability to flood risks is increasing. This all raises new questions about differential and deeply unequal access to socio-environmental health, protection and security. To tackle such fundamental issues, the Water Resources Management (WRM) chair group has set up and coordinates the Water Justice / Justicia Hídrica Alliance. This worldwide network departs from the notion that in water governance issues, the questions of sustainability and ecological integrity cannot be dealt with in separation from questions of fairness, solidarity and justice. Combining these requires original and creative analyses that acknowledge that 'water' is as much a biophysical, as an engineering, as a social, symbolic and political issue.

### An intercontinental network

The Water Justice alliance is a research, training and action network that brings together academic, policy-making and civil society institutions, and comprises of numerous scholars, professionals, students and grass-root leaders – in Latin America, North-America and Europe and expanding towards Africa and Asia. Since over a decade, beyond isolated projects, the alliance combines theoretical with comparative empirical research, with societal action in training and policy advocacy.

Based on a political ecology approach (Boelens et al., 2018), its research, education and action focuses on the pressing societal problem of how water rights and water-related decision-making are importantly distributed along lines of class, gender, cast and ethnicity -- in the global South, but often also in the North. In many countries contemporary water policies and legislative measures have tended to aggravate historically rooted inequalities rather than solving them. Small-holder irrigator communities, indigenous territories, or local drinking water committees -- often with context-based water practices -- are constantly overruled by bureaucratic water administrations, market-driven water policies, desk-invented legislation and top-down project intervention practices. Given such contradictions and complexities, water science, policy-making, and development interventions face the need to look for new, innovative strategies.

Combining multiple actions and projects (funded by NWO, USA-NSF, EU-ERC, and national governments and NGOs) through Water Justice we have organized research, congresses, as well as yearly courses for many hundreds of students, leaders and young water researchers, in the global South and North, bridging the two cross-culturally and stimulating transdisciplinary collaboration. To illustrate the content that is at the heart of the matter, below we copy one declaration out of many (Crow et al., 2014; resulting from the Water Justice congress that we organized at University of California at Santa Cruz). It triggered large scholarly and societal debate and new research and action projects on water-based inequities, and the ways to confront these.

### *Santa Cruz Declaration on the Global Water Crisis*

*At least one billion people around the world struggle with insufficient access to water. However, the global water crisis is not, as some suggest, primarily driven by water scarcity. Although limited water supply and inadequate institutions are indeed part of the problem, we assert that the global water crisis is fundamentally one of injustice and inequality. This declaration expresses our understanding of water injustice and how it can be addressed.*

**Crisis manifested** *The global water crisis has multiple causes, dimensions and manifestations. One can observe the crisis in rural and urban areas across the global South. We have, for example, observed the following in our fieldwork:*

- Peasants impelled to draw water from a spring, when large nearby pipes carry water to a mine in Peru
- People in Lesotho lacking access to clean drinking water as the government exports water to South Africa
- Community water managers excluded from the Nicaraguan water law
- Young girls in rural Nepal carrying water barrels up long mountain trails at night because climate change and hydroelectric projects have made village taps intermittent
- People bathing in a toxic river in Cambodia
- Residents of Dar es Salaam lacking access to water because the pipes fail to reach the informal settlements where most residents live
- Multinational agribusiness companies growing asparagus for export to the industrialized world, in the desert of Peru, with water taken from indigenous communities in the Andes

*Environmental injustices are not limited to the global South. They are also manifested in the global North where marginalized communities live in similar conditions. For instance, in California's Central Valley, running from Sacramento to Bakersfield, residents in low-income communities pay high prices for contaminated water for domestic and garden uses, and then have to buy bottled water to drink. Clean water from the Sacramento Delta travels in canals, bypassing these communities, for the benefit particularly of large-scale agriculture in Southern California.*

*These are a few of the ironies and inequities that make up the global water crisis. They are inequities of access, illustrations of exclusion and misuse, not the consequences of water shortage. They arise from the tendency of water to flow to the powerful and privileged, and often result from larger processes, including those highlighted in the [full online declaration text](#).*

**Remedies for injustice** *We, the undersigned scholars, community members, activists, officials and citizens, declare that the principal form of the water crisis is not a shortage of water, nor failures of government, but the many injustices in access to, the allocation of, and the quality of water. The global water crisis is not likely to be resolved by the provision of more water. Redressing injustice is a more promising approach. That requires a critical rethinking and transformation in how water, water rights and authority are distributed. We recognize and build upon work that has gone before, including notably the work of the Justicia Hídrica/ Water Justice Alliance, and the work to implement the human right to water and to include water in corporate social responsibility certification initiatives.*

*An understanding of the multidimensional causes of injustice, including historical decisions about infrastructure, unnoticed aspects of technologies, the diversity of ecological constraints, and the use of water to accumulate wealth and power, may each suggest possible openings for the redemption of inequities.*

*We suggest that this work can be furthered through some of the following portfolio of measures to mitigate inequities and to seek a wider water justice.*

*Policy dialogue could be instigated with diverse stakeholders to examine persistent water inequities. There could be harmonizing mechanisms to redress imbalances of power. This mode of action has been pioneered on a range of questions by community-based organizations in several countries. The object of such dialogues on water justice would be to open up long-ignored injustices for collective action by government, judicial process and social protest. Active and conscious efforts to include those who most directly experience injustices are important here.*

*Local actions, multi-scalar mobilizations and democratic assessment. Mobilizations by marginalized household members, water user families, environmental justice organizations, and grass-roots communities and federations often raise significant questions of water equity. Resistance to large hydroelectric and irrigation structures, for example, has sometimes led to multi-stakeholder and democratic discussion. On a global scale, the World Commission on Dams is perhaps the most substantive example of such discussion. Comparable initiatives are required to evaluate the influence of new combinations of physical infrastructure and the social and environmental choices they embody.*

*Academic and reportorial investigations. Both scholarly and journalistic investigations, in a wide range of academic disciplines and by those in the media specializing in questions of poverty or the environment, could examine the implications of established as well as new infrastructure and institutional boundaries. Water access could be understood under this framework but expanded to include multi-scalar processes and situations where boundaries are complicated by the politics of space.*

*Santa Cruz, California, 15 February 2014*

---

The UCSC Declaration, as one illustrative action of a permanent series of collective research, training, education and policy actions by the Water Justice Alliance, fostered worldwide attention to and debate on water injustice questions and evidences. These point at the need to revisit prevailing water management and allocation practices, and reframe distributive issues regarding water quantity and quality. They show the need to transform the rationale and patterns of 'established' water knowledge development and 'institutionalized' intervention policies. They provide concrete inputs for working with a broader, more diverse, transdisciplinary and literally pluri-cultural water-vision and water-interest arena.

Thereby, the alliance examines how understanding, in particular, on-the-ground, 'living water rights' and 'water justice frameworks' are key to comprehending the diverse rationalities of water management, conflicts and solutions. The respective conceptual frameworks that the network has developed provide insight in the diverse ways in which water rights and governance systems are given substance, the complex ways in which sociolegal, cultural-political and technological systems interact, and how they materialize injustice or support greater fairness and democracy.

In the forthcoming five years, the Water Justice Alliance will deepen such academic questions and societal action with partners in North and South through two new, large projects: the ERC Consolidator Grant project Riverhood, and the INREF-funded project River Commons. In a WASS-WIMEK-WIAS collaboration among the CWS chair groups WRM (lead), HWM, and AEW; and other chair groups at Wageningen University including ELS, GEO, and AFI, together with local, national and global partner institutes, 13 PhD and 40 Master projects will investigate societal co-governance of rivers in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America. The projects aim to learn from grassroots experiences in situ and translocally, and build new conceptual and methodological tools for research, education and stakeholder interaction. They foresee supporting river co-governance initiatives at multiple scales through combining scientific excellence and societal co-learning.

## References

Boelens, R., T. Perreault, J. Vos (Eds.) (2018). *Water Justice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crow, B., R. Boelens et al. (2014) Santa Cruz Declaration on the Global Water Crisis, *Water International* 39(2):246-261.

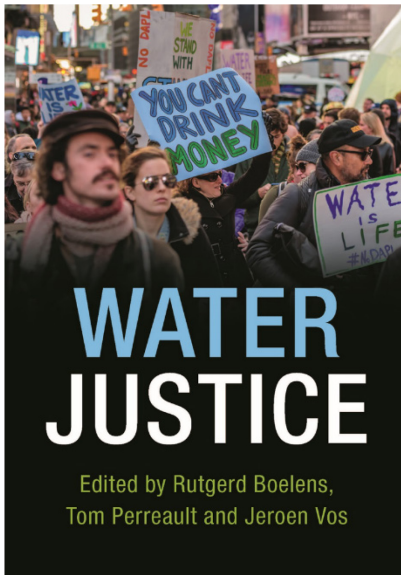
Cambridge University Press, 2018



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

# Water Justice

Rutgerd Boelens, Tom Perreault and  
Jeroen Vos (Editors)



The Water Justice alliance (alianza Justicia Hidrica) has published a new book, with *Cambridge University Press*. Edited by Rutgerd Boelens, Tom Perreault and Jeroen Vos, the book *Water Justice* has contributions from renowned scholars worldwide. The book lays new ground for challenging current water governance forms and unequal power structures. It also provides inspiration for building alternative water realities. *Water Justice* is directed at students, researchers, and policy makers interested in water governance, environmental policy and law, political geography, and cultural anthropology.

**About the book:** Water justice is becoming an ever- more pressing issue in times of increasing water- based inequalities and discrimination. Megacities, mining, forestry, industry, and agribusiness claim an increasingly large share of available surface and groundwater reserves. Water grabbing and pollution generate poverty and endanger ecosystems' sustainability. Beyond large, visible injustices, the book also unfolds the many "hidden" water world injustices, subtly masked as "rational," "equitable," and "democratic." It features critical conceptual approaches, including analysis of environmental, social, cultural, and legal issues surrounding the distribution and management of water. *Water Justice* is illustrated with case studies of historic and contemporary water injustices and contestations around the world.