

INTRODUCTION



Bending towards water justice: pathways for truth, reconciliation, inclusion and transformative actions

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ABSTRACT

We summarize the key contributions to a special issue on water justice. We contend that there is no inevitable arc of history that bends towards justice. Water justice will only be achieved by the collective actions of individuals, institutions and communities working together with a commitment to common goals and the means to effect change. We urge all who ponder on the issues of water justice, and who read and consider the stories in this special issue, to take the next critical step to become part of the solution, and in solidarity with others, to deliver a better water world.

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Introduction

We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.
(Dr Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr (1964 Nobel Peace Laureate), 31 March 1968)

The arc bends toward justice, but it only bends toward justice because people pull it towards justice. It doesn't happen on its own.
(Eric H. Holder, Jr, 82nd US Attorney General, 2009–15), 21 September 2016)

The world faces severe global risks of over-extraction and misuse of water that will prevent achievement, by 2030, of United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6: ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. The crisis of water availability and access, and degradation of water resources, perpetuates a cycle of water injustice when: (1) people do not have water access to meet their needs (physical, social, economic and cultural) and human rights; (2) there is inadequate recognition and protection of these needs (including cultural practices) such that there is distributive injustice; (3) water governance is not inclusive and lacks procedural justice, especially in relation to vulnerable people; and (4) knowledge is withheld, obscured or marginalized to maintain an unjust status quo.

Sadly, those most afflicted by water injustice are the impoverished and vulnerable. As this special issue shows, a critical first step to overcoming water injustice is to recognize that it occurs across scales and axes of social difference that include, but are not limited to, gender, income, race, religion and ethnicity.

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Here, we provide a series of ‘stories’ that increase the global understanding of both the challenge and the pathways forward towards water justice. Our motivation, as editors, was for the special issue: (1) to amplify ‘voice’ to those suffering from water injustice; (2) to promote ‘truth’ in relation to injustice and the impediments to water justice; (3) to seek ‘reconciliation’ and meaningful pathways to overcome past and current water injustice; and (4) to support ‘inclusion’ with evidence and information for practitioners, governments, academics, civil society and communities about how to incorporate water justice within existing or transformed water governance.

Each of the eight contributions in the special issue, in their own way, respond to seven guiding or framing questions. These questions provide the context to compare across different water stories the evidence to interrogate the causes of water injustice; and the insights to appreciate the impediments to water justice. The individual responses in each of the eight contributions provide a means to appreciate the broader issues and global scale of water injustice.

Framing questions for the special issue:

- *For whom?* (e.g. the affected people(s) and their places).
- *To what?* (e.g. access, availability, water quality and sanitation).
- *Where? And at what scale?* (e.g. location/spatial and also the human scale such as individual, community and national scale).
- *When?* (e.g. current situation, lessons from the past, future actions for justice and sustainability).
- *Why?* (e.g. what historical, political–institutional, socio-economic and other frameworks or perspectives provide an explanation for water injustice).
- *How?* (e.g. which drivers of water injustice should be prioritized? What scope is there to mitigate water injustice within existing responses and governance structures?).
- *Which actions are required?* (e.g. ethical decision-making, unequal power relationships, dispossession, disenfranchisement, etc.).

The authors of each contribution answered these questions in their own way to provide a unique story. While we acknowledge there is no universal form for understanding water justice, these questions serve as a reflexive guide and process to explore and to investigate water justice.

We recognize that others have travelled before us in responding to water justice and highlight that our guiding questions are not the only or necessarily the preferred lens to understand water justice. For instance, water justice is often framed in relation to the human right to water (e.g. Miroso & Harris, 2012) or environmental justice (Harris et al., 2015). Separately, Neal et al. (2014) proposed a framework with 10 steps to water justice, while Sultana (2018) has recommended three key water justice actions: water education, investigation and ethics. Joy et al. (2014) have advocated for a framework that ‘repoliticizes’ issues of control, distribution rights and access within the wider development pathways that contribute to water (in-)justice (Boelens et al., 2018).

In addition, to these more general water justice perspectives, Robison et al. (2017) provide a framework for Indigenous water justice in settler–colonial contexts. Another non-Western lens, an Anishinaabek (Ojibwe, Potawatomi, Odawa, Chippewa, Mississauga, Saulteaux, Nipissing and Algonquin Nations of Canada and the United States) framing of

love, mutual respect and responsibility towards water (and the natural world) also emphasizes mutual obligations and relationships to natural law (McGregor, 2013). Indigenous and Traditional Knowledge perspectives offer valuable insights about the nature of water injustice and the remedial actions to promote water justice.

Voices for water justice

Unfortunately, the special issue does not provide a comprehensive report on the many water injustices found in every country in the world. The Covid-19 pandemic upset many lives and plans, including our own ambitions to give greater attention to community voices. Many practitioners and community leaders most active in working for water justice had more important priorities, including saving lives, during the pandemic than contributing to this special issue. Thus, in the end, our special issue presents a limited but nevertheless valuable selection of water justice stories: one from Europe, two from Africa (South Africa and Tanzania), one from Latin America (Colombia), one from Southeast Asia (Laos) and three Indigenous (Aboriginal) stories from Australia.

In our view, ‘truth telling’ about water injustice is a key first step on the pathway towards meaningful change and reconciliation. Transformational change can only come if we avoid post-truths, prejudices, and superficial judgements and conclusions. The much harder step beyond acknowledging the truths of water injustice is to act in ways that deliver a more just future.

For us, reconciliation is about ‘coming together’ and inclusion and is the opposite to alienation, not only from other people but also from nature and the living world. To have meaning, reconciliation must include meaningful actions to resolve past and existing injustice and to restore what was lost or taken or damaged by ignorance, by lack of concern, by malice or by failures of implementation. Reconciliation and restoration are fundamental to achieving justice: if wrongs are not recognized and then ‘resolved’ or mitigated, how can there be justice?

Using the framing questions, we briefly summarize each water story in the special issue. For a comprehensive understanding, we urge all to read the individual stories and to consider the multiple and different insights of each in relation to truth-telling, reconciliation and inclusion, and actions to promote water justice.

Law versus justice: the Strategic Aboriginal Water Reserve (SAWR) in the Northern Territory, Australia (Nikolakis & Grafton, 2021)

WHOM

Eligible Indigenous (Aboriginal) land or exclusive native titleholders.

WHAT

Reserve water for Indigenous economic development.

WHERE

Water Allocation Plan Areas, Northern Territory, Australia.

WHEN

Present and future.

WHY

Stated intent is to create jobs on 'Country' and to protect Indigenous access to water for economic development.

HOW

Further steps towards water justice, and practical justice more broadly, are needed beyond the existing SAWR legislation. These steps have been highlighted by the Northern and Central Land Councils throughout the SAWR legalization process.

ACTIONS

Recognize Indigenous water rights and empower Indigenous communities through allocations and supportive systems. Only by actively listening to Indigenous communities and providing adequate resources to Indigenous custodians to govern Country (including surface and groundwater), in their own ways to meet their own needs, will the critical impediments towards water justice be overcome.

Water colonialism and Indigenous water justice in south-eastern Australia (Hartwig, Jackson, Markham & Osborne, 2021)

WHOM

Aboriginal peoples in south-eastern Australia and their 'Country'.

WHAT

Dimensions of injustice include continued misrecognition and exclusion from state water governance processes, damaging socio-ecological relationships, and ongoing expropriation of water and water-derived wealth from Aboriginal peoples.

WHERE

New South Wales region of the Murray–Darling Basin, south-eastern Australia.

WHEN

Examining and addressing the present condition of Indigenous water (in)justice.

WHY

The emerging concept of water colonialism (the why) as a framework that provides an explanation of the causes of contemporary and historical Indigenous water injustices and the barriers to the realization of water justice.

HOW

To bring together main findings and discuss implications for future policies to respond to multiple dimensions of Indigenous water justice. To recommend that any Australian government's response to the socio-economic dimension must act to overcome the underlying colonial legacies of dispossession and maldistribution of water, land and capital simultaneously.

ACTIONS

Justice theories need to encompass a fourth dimension – the vitally important socio-ecological realm – if they are to serve as conceptual resources for advancing the needs of Indigenous peoples.

Water and land justice for Indigenous communities in the Lowbidgee Floodplain of the Murray–Darling Basin, Australia (Woods, Woods & Fitzsimons, 2021)

WHOM

The First Nations Nari Nari (Aboriginal) people of which two of the authors belong.

WHAT

To improve water and land justice for Indigenous people by different levels of government, non-government organizations and Indigenous organizations at Gayini Nimmie-Caira.

WHERE

Lowbidgee Floodplain, southern New South Wales, Australia.

WHEN

Past and present.

WHY

To deliver environmental flows, to protect First Nations Cultural Heritage, and to ensure long-term sustainable land management. To provide water (and land) justice understanding from the perspective of the Nari Nari people, the Traditional Custodians of Gayini Nimmie-Caira, and to highlight its applicability of this model to other regions.

HOW

Outline the key works to restore the floodplain for its environmental and cultural values.

ACTIONS

Explore the key factors that enabled this model to succeed and the applicability for this model for other landscapes.

Perceptions of Tanzanian smallholder irrigators on impact pathways between water equity and socioeconomic inequalities (Manero & Wheeler, 2021)

WHOM

Smallholder farmers in Tanzania.

WHAT

Water inequities and socio-economic inequalities within smallholder irrigation schemes in Sub-Saharan Africa.

WHERE

Rural Tanzania.

WHEN

Past, present and future, but relevant interviews were conducted between May and July 2015.

WHY

To address the connection between inequality of opportunity and inequality of outcomes.

To make progress towards the SDGs, which pursue advancements in water access, economic growth, gender and social equality in an interconnected and interdependent manner.

HOW

Water scarcity as the most commonly perceived reason for water inequity.

Greater water equity of supply could potentially avert this injustice by lowering the risk of crop failure of disadvantaged irrigators and increasing opportunities for higher crop yields.

ACTIONS

Education, empowerment and strong governance are proposed as possible avenues towards greater water equity and inclusive growth.

Informality and water justice: community perspectives on water issues in Cape Town's low-income neighbourhoods (Enqvist, Ziervogel, Metelerkamp, van Breda, Dondi, Lusithi, Mdunyelwa, Mgwigwi, Mhlalisi, Meyeza, Nomela, October, Rangana & Yalabi, 2020)

WHOM

Residents in low-income households in communities in and around Cape Town, South Africa.

WHAT

Water-related issues perceives as urgent by these communities.

WHERE

Cape Town's townships and informal settlements, at the individual to community level.

WHEN

Present.

WHY

The identified issues of injustice are largely rooted in the segregation imposed by South Africa's apartheid policies, but are also a product of the continued failure of the City of Cape Town to address the needs of a growing population of poor residents. These residents are often dependent on informal support networks, far from public amenities and exposed to environmental risks.

HOW

A key driver of injustice that needs to be responded to is the imbalance of 'perspectives' which impairs the City of Cape Town's ability to resolve the problems and injustices experienced by its residents.

ACTIONS

Active efforts, which include community voices, are needed to move from tokenistic participation to much more inclusive water governance.

Impounded rivers, compounded injustice: contesting the social impacts of hydraulic development in Laos (Blake & Barney, 2021)

WHOM

Vulnerable communities in Laos.

WHAT

Displacement and dispossession from hydro developments of Laotian communities.

WHERE

Laos.

WHEN

Recent past to present.

WHY

Historical and political–institutional context of socialist–authoritarian rule.

HOW

The benefits of hydroelectric development are concentrated with key decision-makers and those that finance their development that leaves many Laotians no better off or even worse off as a result of these developments.

ACTIONS

Radical reforms are required. No single action is possible to overcome present injustices, but transparency as to what has happened, and is happening, is a necessary (but not sufficient) first step.

Murky waters: the impact of privatizing water use on environmental degradation and the exclusion (Arango, Senent-De Frutos & Molina, 2021)

WHOM

Vulnerable communities, especially Afro-Colombian populations in Colombia.

WHAT

Legal inequalities transgress the collective rights of communities and their communal property. These transgressions have contributed to a series of ecological crises, the collapse of fishing systems and problems with access to and availability of water for river communities.

WHERE

Colombia's Caribbean regions.

WHEN

1980s–present.

WHY

Privatization of water, land and other communal goods.

HOW

Consequences of armed conflict in rural parts of the country – associated with agro-industrial plantations – have highlighted inequalities. These inequalities are

exacerbated by state and private hydrological initiatives and related land ownership and/or control.

ACTIONS

Recognized and enforceable rights to water and communal property for communities and the restoration of rivers and wetlands on which they depend.

Water justice and Europe's Right2Water movement (van den Berg, Vos & Boelens, 2021)

WHOM

All Europeans, but with global insights.

WHAT

Water injustice occurs not only in terms of access but also in relation to discourses.

WHERE

Europe.

WHEN

Present.

WHY

The right to water is still not achieved.

HOW

Three factors that can drive injustice must be responded to include: profit maximization, power imbalances and the natural monopoly of water services provision.

ACTIONS

Build democratic political frameworks for organizing and defending public water services.

Less talk, more walk

As we have noted elsewhere (Grafton et al., 2021), sadly there is no inevitable arc of history that bends towards justice. Importantly, water justice cannot be reduced to a series of processes and formulae. Instead, injustice must be placed into history, context, circumstances and consequences. In our view, promoting water justice is a recursive process requiring ongoing attention, not least because each circumstance generates its own consequences that demands bespoke actions.

We conclude by highlighting that water justice will only be achieved by the collective actions of individuals, institutions and communities working together with a commitment to common goals and the means to effect change. Critical to the successful delivery of justice actions is a recognition that the world needs, and cannot wait any longer for, transformative change to deliver water for all.

We urge all who ponder on the issues of water justice, and who read and consider the stories in this special issue, to take the next critical step to become part of the solution,

and in solidarity with others, deliver a better water world.

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