

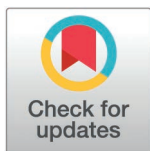
OPINION

Water justice for all

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Júbilo

Humanidad:

seres de agua

alegría,

vida

art and words by Dina

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We define water justice is a process that supports equitable, sustainable, and culturally appropriate access to healthy water, recognizing both human rights and the collective rights of peoples. Without water justice, the world will struggle to deliver any of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), most obviously SDG 6, Ensure Access to Water and Sanitation for All. Despite much progress in the delivery of improved drinking water to households in urban areas, as of 2020 only one third of those living in low- and middle-income countries had access to safely managed drinking waters services [1].

At its core, water justice responds to questions of who gets water and who does not (for both people and nature) (*distributive, restorative and redistributive justice*), who participates in decision-making and how (*recognition, procedural and representation justice*), what knowledge matters, and how knowledge is included in water governance (*epistemic and relational justice*) [2]. Furthermore, it encompasses: (a) '*systems thinking*', including the causes, history, geography and consequences of 'too much, too little and too dirty' water; (b) *inclusiveness*, so that all voices get a respected 'seat at the table'; (c) *relationality*, by incorporating place-based decision-making around water and communities and not only human considerations; and (d) *justice-principled and diverse pathways* when responding to disadvantage and inequality [3].

International day for water justice

The International Day for Water Justice is the first global effort dedicated to co-operatively respond, via community-led initiatives, to the challenges of water injustice in relation to water access, use, and governance. The First International Day for Water Justice took place on 31st January 2025 in Canberra, Australia and was initiated by the Water Justice Hub and the Just Water Alliance (see [Fig 1A](#)). The selected date of the event was in remembrance of an injustice that occurred exactly one year earlier when a judicial appeal by Indigenous Traditional Owners to stop an up-to 40,000 megalitres/year, 30-year water groundwater extraction licence (the Singleton water licence) was rejected [4].

The Mexican government hosted the Second International Day for Water Justice (hereafter the Day). It was held at the *Instituto Mexicano de Tecnológica del Agua* (IMTA) Jiutepec, Mexico on 25–26 January 2026 (see [Fig 1B](#)). The event was co-convened by the Water Justice Hub (Australia), *Agencia Mexicana de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo* (AMEXCID), *Relaciones Exteriores* (Mexico), with support from the Mexican Embassy in Australia, the *Instituto para el Diálogo Global y la Cultura del Encuentro* (Argentina), and the Instituto de Investigaciones para el Desarrollo con Equidad, EQUIDE, at Universidad Iberoamericana (Mexico). Presentations were in both Spanish and English, with simultaneous translation for attendees.

The Day connected traditional and dominant knowledge to highlight water injustices and to promote meaningful solutions for equitable water access, while strengthening global solidarity and knowledge-sharing by sharing experiences from communities facing water injustice. Presentations were made by water researchers and communities [5] including water justice narratives delivered by communities from Australia, Canada, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, Nepal, and South Africa. In attendance were 445 people, virtual and in person, from 55 countries including from civil society, governments, international organizations, and academic researchers.

The Day included South–South exchanges and enabled participants to recognize shared patterns of water injustice. Communities from the Global South identified common structural challenges, including extractive pressures, criminalisation of water defenders, weak consultation processes, and fragmented multi-level governance. A powerful community narrative from Ecuador was provided by Carmen Luisa Pérez Arevalo and Rosalia Paguay. They are Kanari and defenders of their sacred lakes and waters, *Kimsakocha*, threatened by mining developments [6]. For their community's peaceful protests, they have been criminalized and subject to threats and acts of violence including the bombing of one of their homes. Nevertheless, they remain resolute in their struggle for water justice.

Water Justice for All

The International Day for Water Justice is a step towards creating spaces where people, knowledge, and experiences are shared to respond to gaps in advancing water justice. These spaces are about implementing practical actions in support of water



Fig 1. A. Closing panel of International Day for Water Justice 2025. From left to right: R. Quentin Grafton, Pamela Katic, Kirsty Howey, Sarah Milne, Kat Taylor, Anne Poelina, Paul Wyrwoll and John Williams. **B. Artwork 'Júbilo' by DINA** (artist not fully identified), photographed at IMTA facilities. Photo taken by R. Quentin Grafton on 25 January 2026 at Second International Day for Water Justice, IMTA, Jiutepec, Mexico.

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justice. Acknowledging injustice is important but without concrete actions, recognition risks becoming only a symbolic gesture without substance [2]. Possible concrete actions towards water justice that could support the delivery of SDG 6 include [3], (Fig 6):

- (a) *SDG Targets 6.1 and 6.2*: Legislated and enforceable rights for households to have minimum service levels that guarantee basic needs are appropriately satisfied (such as reliability, quality and affordability of drinking water). Rural and remote water delivery services fit for purpose, people and place. Legal protection for key ecosystems (such as wetlands and source catchments) and science–practitioner–community partnerships for justice-based adaptations to water-related risks.
- (b) *SDG Targets 6.3 and 6.6*: Relationality (for example, 'rights of nature', public trust doctrine and common asset trusts), active democracy (for example, including citizen-led decision-making and participatory approaches), and reallocation of water to achieve environmental and justice goals including alignment with the UN Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

- (c) *SDG Target 6.4*: Transparent, real-time water audits (for example, inflows, outflows, recharge, extractions and consumption), nature-based water storage (such as wetlands and sustainable managed aquifer recharge), and procedural and epistemic justice-led management to include unheard voices (for example, traditional, ecological or Indigenous knowledge).
- (d) *SDG Targets 6.5 and 6.6*: Implementing ‘free, prior and informed’ consent for Indigenous and locally affected communities regarding proposals/actions on Indigenous lands and local commons; requiring the use of the precautionary principle in planning and investments from local to global levels; and advancing climate adaptation with a resilience framing including research and funding for locally driven adaptive management (for example, community-based catchment management). These approaches are most effective when supported by sustained, multi-level governance arrangements that embed these principles in ongoing processes rather than one-off consultations.

The knowledge sharing and actions around International Day for Water Justice (31st January) should be celebrated. In our view, this important event supports communities, researchers and practitioners to help deliver ‘Water Justice for All’. In 2027, we plan to gather again for the Third International Day for Water Justice in Johannesburg, South Africa with satellite events in multiple countries, including Australia and Mexico.

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