

## **Fairness and the Human Right to Water: A Preliminary Cross-cultural Theory**

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In this paper we attempt to develop a preliminary cross-cultural theory of conceptions of fairness around the right to water. We use an innovative process of theme and meta-theme analysis to examine, contrast, and integrate local beliefs in this domain using interview data collected in four ecologically and culturally different sites – squatter settlements in the Bolivian highlands, an indigenous coastal Fijian village, urban and rural communities in central New Zealand, and a desert city in the southwestern United States. To develop such an elemental theory, our analysis of people's ideas in these varied places focuses on three key questions: How are conceptions of fairness in water grounded in local cultures, ecologies, and governance systems? What general factors or conditions might best explain variation in ideas around specific dimensions of fairness in water distribution? Are there general principles of water distribution that people understand as fundamentally fair or unfair cross-culturally?

Our analysis of local conceptions of water fairness is based on interview data collected with 219 adults in four countries in 2007-2008. From these interviews we a) identified themes on a country-by-country basis to ensure that none of the cultural knowledge specific to each site was lost in the initial coding process and b) conducted a meta-analysis in order to trace commonalities across the sites. The central themes identified in each fieldsite resonate with local ecological, economic, and political situations, such as water scarcity in Bolivia, collective action and fair water access in Fiji, easy and abundant water access in New Zealand, and water access, pricing issues, and loose restrictions in the southwestern U.S. Our meta-analysis found four key domains – water access, water quantity, the role of government, and equity / equality issues – to be consistent concerns across the four field sites. By contrast, water quality, water cost, water source, water rights and infrastructure turn out to be only relevant to people in some sites. The distinction between water-rich and water-scarce sites and wealthier versus poorer economies seems to provide much of the contextual explanation of this variation, and as scarcity and costs rise, we would predict that discord around key notions of fairness will increase.

Importantly, our findings can be directly related to the global movement toward defining water as a human right, and show that there are shared concerns that are not well developed or represented in current international agreements. In terms of building a more sophisticated theory of fairness related to the human right to water, we need to develop and test core hypotheses around why notions of fairness might vary from place to place. If the differences prove to be mostly tied to ecological factors (e.g., water-poor or water-rich), such as we observed in the patterns of concern over water rights in this analysis, rather than – say – sociocultural factors (e.g., collectivistic or individualistic cultural beliefs), then this has implications for how we can conceptualize and implement the human right to water in a meaningful and sustainable way.