



How do non-Indigenous Canadians understand access to safe water in First Nations communities? What are the barriers to their participation in creating change?



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In 2013, members of a multi-year research **partnership** (*Centre for Human Rights Research, University of Manitoba; Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs; Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak; University of Winnipeg*) tried to answer these questions, as they explored the **types of public advocacy strategies that might be effective** for gaining more public support for clean running water and sanitation in First Nations communities.

As part of this inquiry, Laura Funk (Sociology, University of Manitoba) and graduate student Michelle Gorea invited **22 non-Indigenous Winnipeggers** to talk about how they understood the challenges faced by First Nations communities, including access to water. We then examined what they told us in detail.

What did we find? Most participants were aware that access to water was a problem for First Nations communities, although few could speak in much detail about the issue. When they had the opportunity to learn more about the issue, participants often expressed concern, sadness, frustration, anger, curiosity and surprise or shock. They viewed a lack of access to clean water in a “developed” country such as Canada as shameful and embarrassing. Most viewed this as a violation of human rights.

Although most participants stressed a need for public awareness about the issue, they understood the issue is deep rooted and difficult to fix.

Despite their concerns about First Nations social justice issues (including water), few participants were actively or extensively involved in creating change. Findings suggest that non-Indigenous Winnipeggers’ **level of support and involvement may be limited based on their own:**

- Knowledge about the extent and nature of the problem;
- Understanding of what a person can do to create change;
- Perceived personal time and energy needed to affect change;
- Perceived ability to personally make a meaningful difference;
- A sense of personal connection or closeness to the issue;
- Negative stereotyping and racism towards First Nations;
- Interpretation of who is responsible for the problem.



Photo courtesy of Joe Bryksa, *Winnipeg Free Press*

We noticed that participants tended not to talk about their *personal* sense of responsibility for First Nations' water access. Negative stereotypes about corruption at the community level (Chief/Band and/or community) appeared to erode potential support among several participants.

How can these findings be used? Findings can help

First Nations communities, organizations and their allies develop public advocacy strategies for diverse groups of non-Indigenous Canadians. They could:

- Provide concrete suggestions and examples showing how First Nations and non-Indigenous Canadians can make a difference (e.g., creating a collection of successful initiatives that have worked in other areas across Canada or internationally);
- Create an awareness about the third-world living conditions that are a reality for many First Nations with lack of access to clean water and the impacts of the social determinants of health;
- Draw connections between poor access to clean water, and historical and ongoing colonization of First Nations;
- Frame the issue as a human rights violation;
- Use comparisons and contrasts – put things in perspective (e.g., contrasting the two-day boil water advisory in Winnipeg against the reality faced by many First Nations communities on a daily basis).
- Promote non-Indigenous Canadians' sense of personal connection to and responsibility for the issue;
- Challenge negative stereotypes and misunderstandings about responsibility for lack of access to clean running water in First Nations communities.

About the research partnership: Additional research teams are studying potential legal and psychological strategies for First Nations water advocacy, and exploring innovative technological approaches to speed up the process of providing safe drinking water and sanitation in First Nations communities. For more information visit chrr.info/water-rights.



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