

Is water a human right?

Asking this question leads people to support more government action on First Nations water issues.



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Context

A shocking number of First Nations homes do not have clean running water and/or wastewater services—and this has unfortunately been the case for some time. Through the University of Manitoba Centre for Human Rights Research (<http://chrr.info>), an interdisciplinary group of university professors, community partners, and others came together to co-develop evidenced-based advocacy messages—in an effort to try to reduce public apathy.



Who We Are—The Social Psychology Group of the Public Engagement Cluster
Funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Partnership Development Grant entitled “The Most Precious Gift: The Right to Clean Water in First Nations” (Principal Investigator: Karen Busby), the grant working groups include economic, legal, and public engagement clusters. The goal of the Public Engagement Cluster is to understand what advocacy strategies First Nations peoples might find acceptable and explore non-Indigenous Canadians’ attitudes toward the issue.¹

About this Summary

This is a plain-language summary of the work of a combined University of Manitoba / University of Winnipeg Social Psychology working group, the members of which are:

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A number of partners have helped to make this work possible, most notably the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, First Nations Health and Social Secretariat of Manitoba, Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak, and 2010-2014 Chief Jerry Primros and Council of Nisichwayasihk Cree Nation—as well as other non-Indigenous partners. In this summary we describe our interim findings. Other Public Engagement Cluster members have conducted interviews with non-Indigenous Canadians (co-investigator Laura Funk, Sociology) and completed a photovoice project with a partnering community (co-investigator Colin

¹ Artwork depicting women as traditional water keepers courtesy of Jackie Traverse of Lake St. Martin First Nation.

Bonnycastle, Social Work, with Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation). Our project is still in progress. We expect to have the final results and more detailed publicly accessible summaries in January 2017.

Our Work

Our first step was to get feedback about possible strategies that might work. In March 2014, members of our research team traveled to Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation near Thompson and met with community members, health workers, and band council to understand what types of public advocacy strategies might be acceptable to First Nations. Informed by these discussions, we conducted a national survey assessing non-Indigenous Canadians' support for the issue. Results from the national survey showed that people were most supportive of government action for First Nations water and wastewater services when they were first asked to consider whether water is a human right. In contrast, survey respondents who were first asked to consider their Canadian values or who received no instructions (control condition) showed less support. These findings suggested that using a human rights frame to describe First Nations water and wastewater issues could increase public support for addressing the issue. To better understand the effect, we then conducted a series of follow-up studies with undergraduate student samples to directly test why human rights framing increases public support and factors that may affect whether it is effective. We are now synthesizing the results of these studies and running a last set of studies with national samples this fall.

Key Findings

Across several studies we have found that framing water as a human right leads to increased support for government action. Intentionally designing a portable frame, our results indicate we can nudge people toward more support with a simple question: Is water a human right? *Why?* In the national survey, thinking about water as a human right made people feel more morally outraged and empathic toward First Nations without access to clean, running water, as well as that the government could do something to fix the situation. Throughout our studies we have also investigated who is most likely to support government action as well. Some studies suggest allies may include:

- People who think not having water and wastewater services causes suffering;
- People who think babies, children, or expectant mothers are most negatively affected;
- Women;
- Those identifying as more "liberal" politically, and;
- Minority non-Indigenous Canadians.

Advantage of this Frame

The human rights frame can be embedded into any advocacy material—or in conversation. Importantly, however, other strategies and mechanisms for increasing support should complement this messaging.

Conclusion

Framing First Nations' water issues as a right may be promising for increasing public support for government action. An effective public advocacy strategy may also emphasize the suffering of babies, children, and expectant mothers that results from inadequate water services.

For More Information: <http://chrr.info> and <http://katherinestarzyk.com>