Co-Creating an Intersectional Water Justice Toolkit and Documentary in Cape Town, South Africa

David Puvaneyshwaran, MSocSci (Social Work)[1]
Carmen H. Logie, PhD[1,2,3]
Sarah Van Borek, PhD[1]
Amber Abrams, PhD[4]
Lauren Grootboom, MPhil[4]
Frannie MacKenzie, BA[1]
Lina Taing, PhD[5,6,7]
Amaya Perez-Brumer, PhD[8]
Lesley Gittings, PhD[9,10]

Water justice is the equitable, reliable, and safe access to clean water and sanitation and meaningful community inclusion in water governance, which is constrained by multiple social inequities. Financial (housing) and social inequities such as gender inequitable norms and gender-based violence, land insecurity, racial discrimination, and sexuality diversity (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer [LGBTQ+]) exclusion perpetuate unequal access to water and sanitation for historically marginalized populations. This highlights the need for an intersectional approach to building alliances to advance water justice across diverse social movements. In Cape Town, South Africa, legacies of colonialism and apartheid continue to shape spatial and infrastructural inequalities, especially in backyards. In response, we co-developed the "Water Justice Alliance-Building Toolkit" through a community-engaged process with activists from five intersecting movements: water justice, women's rights, housing rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and racial justice. The participatory co-production process involved filmed walk-along interviews, focus groups, arts-based workshops, and community dialogue, culminating in modular tools designed to support intersectional education, alliance-building, and advocacy. In this article, we describe the toolkit's development, its components, and an accompanying documentary, "Its Ebbs and Flows," which centers lived experiences of water injustice through visuals and multilingual narration. Toolkit activities, including discussion guides, artmaking, song-making,

[1]*Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada*
[2]*United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment, and Health, Richmond Hill, Ontario, Canada*
[3]*Women's College Research Institute, Women's College Hospital, Toronto, Ontario, Canada*
[4]*Department of Civil Engineering, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa*
[5]*Environmental Sustainability Research Centre, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada*
[6]*The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK*
[7]*School of Earth, Environment, & Society, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada*
[8]*Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada*
[9]*School of Health Studies, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada*
[10]*Centre for Social Science Research, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa*

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and role-play, facilitate inclusive dialogue. We conclude with implications for practice and policy, highlighting how participatory, arts-based approaches can foster more responsive health promotion strategies. By validating community knowledge and creative expression, this toolkit expands on whose expertise counts to guide a just transition and offers replicable templates for promoting health equity in climate-vulnerable settings.

Keywords: water justice; health equity; participatory arts-based methods; community-based research; intersectionality; climate resilience; collaborative governance; just transition; Indigenous movements

Water justice is defined as equitable, reliable, and safe access to clean water and sanitation, as well as the inclusion of affected communities in water governance (Black et al., 2025; Boelens et al., 2018; Joy et al., 2014; Zwarteveen & Boelens, 2014). In Cape Town, South Africa, histories of colonialism and apartheid continue to shape unequal water access, particularly for communities living in backyards (Black et al., 2025; Enqvist & Ziervogel, 2019). Residents of these areas often endure long waits for shared taps and exclusion from municipal planning processes (Black et al., 2025; Enqvist & Ziervogel, 2019). These struggles are compounded by the historical dispossession of Indigenous communities from land and water bodies, underscoring the importance of Indigenous water rights and movements as central to broader water justice efforts in South Africa.

Although the "Day Zero" water crisis in 2018 brought global visibility to Cape Town's water challenges, its impacts were uneven across the city, with formal low-income neighborhoods facing the most severe restrictions (Enqvist & Ziervogel, 2019). Nonetheless, many grassroots activists highlight that for communities historically excluded from infrastructure and services, the struggle for water long predates Day Zero and continues well beyond it (Robins, 2019). While South Africa's national legislation recognizes equitable water access as a right, access remains shaped by race, gender, class, land tenure, and other intersecting factors. Research has shown that water collection in unsafe or poorly lit areas often increases exposure to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), emotional distress, and physical health risks (Tallman et al., 2022), which is especially pertinent in the South African context with high rates of SGBV.

To explore conceptions of water justice and how to build alliances across diverse social movements, we conducted a community-based research study in Cape Town that resulted in the development of the "Water Justice Alliance-Building Toolkit." This was developed through gathering insights and recommendations with activists across five social movements—water justice, women's rights, housing rights, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) rights, and racial justice. Through a participatory process that included filmed walk-along interviews, focus groups (FGs), alliance-building workshops, and community dialogues, we collaboratively created a suite of creative, contextually specific tools to support intersectional water justice education and action. A short documentary film, "Its Ebbs and Flows," developed alongside serves as an entry point for community screenings and policy dialogues.

This article outlines the development and components of the toolkit and documentary, with reflections on lessons learned. We conclude with practice- and policy-oriented implications for advancing water justice, health equity, and a just climate transition through participatory arts-based methods.

WATER JUSTICE ALLIANCE-BUILDING TOOLKIT

The toolkit developed through the research project centered activist voices and intergenerational knowledge-sharing. The research team conducted 10 interviews, primarily using a filmed walk-along method, with social justice activists, inviting them to narrate their personal and political perspectives on and relationships to water justice. These interviews formed the basis of the documentary film, a central component of the toolkit.

In addition, five focus groups (FGs) were held with activists from each of the five social movements to identify key concerns, definitions of justice, and underrepresented perspectives. These findings informed the development of creative workshop activities and reflective tools.

To foster dialogue across movements, two gender-segregated intensive alliance-building workshops (2 days each) were conducted with activists (n = 5 men, n = 5 women, trans-inclusive). The project culminated in a community dialogue with 40 activists and policymakers to collectively review the toolkit and explore its applications for advocacy and organizing.

CO-DESIGN APPROACH

The toolkit was co-designed with Cape Town activists with lived experiences of water precarity, spatial

injustice, and systemic marginalization. Participants located water struggles within broader social and political landscapes, including gender-based violence, unsafe housing, economic inequality, queer exclusion, and environmental racism.

Recognizing that water justice cannot be achieved through individual efforts, the co-design approach emphasized alliance-building across movements. Participants shaped the language, imagery, and activities within the toolkit, ensuring that the final product reflected shared values of dignity, community well-being, and inclusivity, as well as acknowledging differences in power, access, and risk across social groups.

TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

The Water Justice Alliance-Building Toolkit is a modular resource that can be adapted to various community and advocacy contexts (downloadable from: https://sshinelab.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Final-_2_water-justice-toolkit-compressed24.06.2024.pdf). It comprises the following components:

1. Film and Discussion Guide:

The link to the 17-min documentary is accompanied by 15 open-ended scaffolded discussion questions to promote critical reflection on documentary themes and understanding of intersectional water justice.

2. Drawing and Painting Activities:

Individual and collaborative arts-based activities invite participants to reflect on how water intersects with their lives and draw connections across social issues and shared values. The guided artmaking allows participants to freely imagine and convey their thoughts through a non-verbal medium. Flashcards with quotes and stories illustrate participant reflections from the various social movements.

3. Alliance-Building Activity:

Based on a list of common alliance challenges (e.g., conflicting perspectives and resource competition) and corresponding supports (e.g., community-led events and rallying around shared goals), this activity uses role-play and skit-making to rehearse problem-solving in coalition work.

4. Song-Making Activity:

Using a guided template and a free mobile app (BandLab), participants are invited to write and record verses expressing water justice hopes and actions. It includes a guided framework for song creation.

5. Templates and Resources:

To support adaptation and community-led organizing, the toolkit includes editable templates for partnerships, consent and release, and workshop evaluations. It also includes relevant scholarly and community resources that can inform future toolkits focused on climate justice.

"ITS EBBS AND FLOWS" DOCUMENTARY

A central feature of the toolkit is a 17-min documentary film, which brings to life the everyday struggles, hopes, and strategies of water justice activists in Cape Town. Co-produced with study participants, it draws from the walk-along interviews, in which activists reflected on the politics of water in relation to their activism while physically moving through spaces of joy, danger, care, and exclusion. The film, subtitled in three languages (English, isiXhosa, and Afrikaans), can be accessed freely online (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSfS4dJgsgc&t=4s).

The film surfaces how water insecurity results from a deeply racialized, gendered, and spatial process that reproduces injustice. Importantly, the film also reveals that water access extends beyond basic needs such as drinking, cooking, and washing. It emphasizes an often-overlooked dimension: access to water bodies, such as rivers and the sea, for education, recreation, cultural identity, spiritual connection, and overall well-being. These narratives challenge narrow definitions of water as a purely utilitarian resource and instead foreground it as a site of cultural meaning and community belonging. The film further calls attention to Indigenous water rights and the vital role of Indigenous movements in reimagining water justice frameworks in South Africa.

Through visuals and narration, the film invites viewers to "walk alongside" polluted waterways and broken water and sanitation infrastructure to understand activists' everyday access struggles.

It fosters emotional engagement and expands conventional definitions of water governance by foregrounding affective, embodied, and lived experiences of injustice and resistance. At the same time, it celebrates the strength, creativity, and ongoing efforts of activists working toward change. Grounded in storytelling, it introduces the various movements represented and offers an entry point for exploring cross-movement solidarity, inviting reflection on collective action.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The Water Justice Alliance-Building Toolkit offers a participatory, adaptable, and community-grounded model for advancing health equity and collective advocacy. At its core, the toolkit supports dialogue both within and across social movements, offering tools for activists who often work in silos to explore shared struggles, common goals, and strategic alliances. Through arts-based and experiential methods, the toolkit fosters multiple entry points for engagement that move beyond verbal discussion. This aligns with emerging work demonstrating that participatory, arts-based knowledge mobilization can generate critical reflection and community-informed solutions to health inequities (Black et al., 2025; Logie et al., 2024; Van Borek et al., 2024). These methods accommodate different learning styles and tap into diverse strengths and modes of expression. For participants in multilingual contexts like Cape Town, visual and creative mediums enable expression and reflection in ways that transcend linguistic barriers. This arts-based modality thus holds promise for use with speakers of different languages, especially those who may be excluded from dominant policy discourses. The toolkit expands on "what counts as knowledge" and "whose knowledge counts" in water governance and health promotion, validating embodied experience and creative expression as legitimate forms of insight.

Importantly, the toolkit and documentary film are designed as multiuse resources. Practitioners can integrate them into community education workshops, university classrooms, non-governmental organization (NGO) training, and local campaigns. The modular format allows for contextual adaptation to other issues, such as housing, food insecurity, or climate justice while maintaining an emphasis on participatory reflection and systems thinking. For instance, in an NGO training focused on climate resilience, facilitators might choose to screen the documentary and follow it with adapted select discussion questions such as "what factors affect people's unequal access to water?" and "how might various underrepresented populations experience climate resilience differently and why?" This can then follow a tailored version of the "Map your Waterworld" activity, inviting participants to draw how changing climate conditions impact water access, housing security, or displacement in their own communities (Cohen et al., 2024).

As the toolkit is structured around flexible, standalone components, facilitators can mix and match exercises to suit specific training goals, time constraints, and participant demographics. By rooting these activities in creative, experiential learning, the toolkit encourages deeper engagement and helps shift trainings away from top-down delivery toward co-learning and shared ownership of issues (Cohen et al., 2024). By offering tools that are grounded in lived realities and co-designed with affected communities, this resource contributes to more inclusive, accessible, and responsive approaches to health promotion practice.

While the toolkit was co-designed with activists across five social movements in Cape Town, it has not yet been tested with other populations (e.g., elders, rural communities). Future adaptations may need to consider age-specific facilitation techniques, accessibility needs, and other local forms of expression. Ongoing evaluation and community feedback will be essential to refine the toolkit's usability and impact beyond its initial setting.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The insights generated through the toolkit and film also carry important implications for water governance and public policy. They foreground how technical or infrastructural solutions, such as installation of water management devices, can inadvertently reproduce inequities when they fail to account for the lived realities of marginalized communities. Policies that assume a uniform household nuclear family or stable infrastructure risk exacerbating exclusion rather than addressing it. By surfacing these dynamics through collective and collaborative analysis, the toolkit underscores the urgent need for participatory approaches to water policy—ones that include communities not merely as consultees but as co-creators of solutions (Black et al., 2025).

Crucially, the project revealed how water governance is deeply shaped by inequities across gender, sexuality, and race. Participants shared how women, gender-diverse individuals, and LGBTQ+ community members often face heightened barriers to safe, dignified, and free access to water, whether through exposure to gender-based violence when accessing water or through infrastructural neglect in backyards disproportionately occupied by racialized groups. These findings point to the need for intersectional policy frameworks that integrate the specific lived experiences of racialized, queer, and gender-based minority groups in water planning processes (Boelens et al., 2018; Tallman et al., 2022).

In addition, the co-design methodology itself offers a model for more accountable and grounded governance. Policymakers and planners can draw on this participatory structure to formally include community-based organizations and movement leaders in the development, implementation, and monitoring of water policy, such as the recognition of Indigenous water rights, and services, including the maintenance of water infrastructure. Doing so not only enhances the responsiveness of

service delivery but also affirms the legitimacy of grassroots expertise in shaping more just transitions and sustainable urban futures.

CONCLUSION

The Water Justice Alliance-Building Toolkit and "Its Ebbs and Flows" documentary exemplify how participatory, arts-based methods can be mobilized to advance climate justice, challenge technocratic approaches, and center the lived expertise of marginalized communities. Developed through collaborative research with activists across five social movements in Cape Town, these resources illustrate that water justice is not simply about infrastructure but about dignity, representation, and the right to shape decisions that affect everyday life. The toolkit's modular, multimodal design allows for adaptability across contexts and uses, enabling dialogue and action beyond water justice alone.

In a time of intensifying climate crises, there is a growing need for tools that promote critical reflection, build solidarity and coalitions across social activist groups, and inspire collective action. By validating art-making and community-grounded analysis as legitimate forms of knowledge, we hope this toolkit fosters inclusive, relational, and responsive health promotion with climate-vulnerable populations.

Authorship Contributions

Study design: CHL, SVB, LGittings, and AA. Methodological design: SVB, CHL, LGittings, and AA. Funding acquisition: CHL, APB, LGittings, LT, and AA. Methods/tool management/analysis: CHL, SVB, AA, LG, FM, and LGittings. Manuscript writing: DP, CHL, and SVB. Manuscript editing and critical review: DP, CHL, SVB, AA, LG, FM, LT, AP-B, and LGittings.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study received ethics approval from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board (44907) and the University of Cape Town (EBE/00477/2023).

ORCID iDs

David Puvaneyshwaran https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3358-6223
Carmen H. Logie https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8035-433X
Amber Abrams https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1416-7891
Frannie MacKenzie https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3517-8330

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