

Briefing

Gender; Water

Key findings and recommendations from IIED research on fair water stewardship for businesses and those working with them



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Key points

Companies can reduce operational, supply chain and reputational risk around water use and management by applying a gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) lens to their water stewardship approaches.

Although more companies are engaging with communities as part of their water stewardship practices, very few specifically consider the differentiated impacts of their water use on different groups.

Women, people with disabilities and other marginalised groups are more vulnerable to water security risks; yet they lack the power to participate in discussions with business on how best to manage these risks.

To adopt a fair water footprint, companies must ensure groups that are marginalised within communities for social, cultural, political or economic reasons have a say in the decisions that affect their access to clean, safe, sufficient and affordable water.

Corporate water stewardship: ensuring companies have a fair water footprint

Water is a hugely strategic resource for most companies and its increasing scarcity creates significant business risk. To manage this risk, many companies adopt water stewardship strategies – including consulting with communities in their supply chains – especially around water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) issues. But few consider the differentiated impacts of their water use on marginalised groups. This briefing outlines why companies should apply a gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) lens to their water stewardship practices and, drawing on a case study from leading beverage producer Diageo, offers practical tips on how companies can embed GEDSI principles in community engagement around shared water use.

Water is under increasing pressure from both climate-driven challenges and widespread overextraction. To manage growing water-related business risks, companies are adopting a corporate water stewardship approach,¹ with many engaging in the United Nations Global Compact CEO Water Mandate,² Water Resilience Coalition³ and similar initiatives.

A company's water footprint is the total volume of freshwater it uses across its supply chain to produce goods and services.⁴ Companies with a fair water footprint manage water in a socially equitable, environmentally sustainable and climate-resilient way. This includes: making sure water withdrawals are sustainable and equitable; preventing pollution; ensuring workers' access to safe water and sanitation; protecting ecosystems; and planning for droughts and floods.

With communities along global supply chains often severely affected by water risks, companies are increasingly aware of the need to work with them when planning sustainable corporate water

practices.⁵ But within communities, marginalised groups tend to be more exposed to water risks, more affected by climate change impacts, and frequently excluded from risk management and solution discussions. And when interventions do not intentionally provide for differentiated needs, they risk making things worse, not better.

Differentiated risks and needs

For social, cultural, political and economic reasons, women, people with disabilities, older people, young people, gender minorities, Indigenous communities, the very poor, migrants and displaced populations are more exposed to, and disadvantaged by, water-related risks. And when people share several of these characteristics – say, if they are older women with disabilities or displaced young migrants – their vulnerability is both complex and intersecting.

Gendered roles in water collection and household care mean women are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards, including

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unsafe water. In 80% of water-deprived households – including those that experience physical water scarcity and those that lack full access to safe, sufficient and affordable WASH

– women and girls carry the burden of water collection.⁶ Water insecurity and climate change exacerbate these inequalities, multiplying risks for already marginalised groups.

Women are also key economic actors in agriculture, fisheries, small enterprises and community water management. Water shortages undermine their productivity, limit the growth of the businesses they lead, and restrict their opportunities to adopt water-efficient technologies, compounding existing inequalities in access to land, finance and markets. Women and girls represent 80% of the people who are displaced by extreme weather events and are 14 times more likely to die in a climate-related disaster than men. Yet they also carry significant but under-recognised economic roles that are directly constrained by water insecurity and climate impacts.⁷

In many communities, older people and people with disabilities face barriers to access water resources; and, as they lack representation in local water management structures, these do not often consider their needs.⁸ Climate disaster communications are rarely designed for their specific needs, excluding them from early warning and other alerts and exacerbating their vulnerability. During Hurricane Katrina, people aged over 75 represented less than 7% of the population of New Orleans but accounted for over half of all deaths;⁹ while in Japan, only one in five people with disabilities could evacuate without difficulty during the 2011 Tsunami.¹⁰

Indigenous communities often depend heavily on natural resources, including water. But their lack of both control over these resources and power to influence decisions increases their risk of harm. This applies equally to other minority groups and people that are marginalised in society.

Why apply a GEDSI lens?

A GEDSI-responsive water stewardship programme is a practical approach to improving water risk management, protecting investments and delivering fairer outcomes in the regions on which global business depends. It means moving beyond water efficiency to ensuring equity in who benefits, who decides and who bears the water risks across the value chain. This helps

companies strengthen the effectiveness, durability and legitimacy of water stewardship action. Adopting a GEDSI-aware approach also allows companies to benefit from collective knowledge and suggestions for solutions from those closest to the problems.

On the other hand, not considering GEDSI and ignoring power dynamics and needs within communities can undermine water stewardship investments by excluding key water users from decision making and overlooking differentiated risks and needs. When companies fail to consult diverse groups, their investments are unlikely to meet the real needs of all users, increasing the likelihood of costly conflicts over resource allocation, low adoption and a lack of ownership in assets and management structures. This can result in ineffective or unsustainable interventions, wasted resources and project failure, which bring with them significant reputational and operational risks, reducing productivity and supply chain resilience.

Done well, water projects can be a lever for inclusion and offer a chance to empower marginalised groups by building leadership, livelihoods and resilience for those who need it most.

Few companies are on board

Despite the strong reasons for adopting a GEDSI-responsive approach, IIED research finds limited evidence of companies embedding GEDSI in their water stewardship activities. Although many corporate water management policies refer to engaging stakeholders, including communities, only a handful specify doing so in a GEDSI-aware way to ensure they identify differentiated needs and vulnerabilities and allow everyone to participate in, and benefit from, interventions.

This is true even for companies that have publicly committed to embedding gender, equality and/or social inclusion across their business, and remain committed to these objectives despite significant pushback in the United States and elsewhere against diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).¹¹

Companies cite several reasons for not embedding GEDSI in water management. For many, sustainability efforts focus on managing environmental risks and associated disclosure. In these cases, social inclusion is less prominent and dealt with by different teams often working in silos. Interviews with UK-based multinational companies conducted as part of this research revealed that for companies with large and complex global supply chains, a lack of data about higher-tier suppliers and the communities they source from is a significant barrier to implementing GEDSI practices. Many also report

a lack of clear internal ownership for GEDSI, with water management often boxed into environment, operations or risk departments and GEDSI sitting in community engagement or philanthropy. As a result, nobody feels fully accountable for GEDSI. Other interviewees report skills gaps at the site or supplier level where, rather than risk getting it wrong, companies choose not to engage with the topic at all. It is worth noting that, given the increasingly DEI-hostile environment, many companies have become cautious about language; interviews with delivery partners in the Fair Water Footprints programme revealed that some translate GEDSI framing into risk management, community inclusion, workforce stability or investment protection, while still applying the GEDSI principles in practice.

GEDSI-sensitive WASH approaches

GEDSI awareness is more prevalent among nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations implementing water security programmes, and those working in partnership with companies tend to focus their GEDSI efforts on WASH initiatives, where the case for inclusion is more easily made. Indeed, in IIED's research, most of the examples we found of companies adopting a GEDSI focus were in WASH; we found very little evidence of GEDSI considerations in programmes addressing pollution, overextraction, flood/drought exposure and other risk areas.

Leading WASH-focused international NGO WaterAid puts equality, inclusion and rights at the heart of its activities.¹² Its corporate partnership model has gradually shifted from focusing purely on infrastructure provision or WASH service delivery to more socially conscious, gender- and inclusion-empowering programmes.

We found that most of the companies applying a GEDSI lens to their water stewardship activities are WaterAid partners. They include Gap Inc., Cargill and GSK, whose Women + Water Collaborative focuses on women's leadership and improving access to WASH in water-stressed basins in India;¹³ the VF Corporation partnership, which provides improved WASH services for women garment factory workers in Cambodia;¹⁴ and the Sulzer partnership, which delivers WASH facilities to schools, supporting menstruating girls to stay in education.¹⁵

Lessons from Diageo

While Diageo has been working on GEDSI for many years, we offer this case study not as a

fixed standard for others but rather as inspiration and to illustrate what companies can achieve.

A global leader in the alcoholic beverage sector, Diageo is a founding signatory of the Glasgow Declaration for Fair Water Footprints,¹⁶ has endorsed the United Nations Global Compact CEO Water Mandate and is a founding member of the Water Resilience Coalition, an active member of the Alliance for Water Stewardship and WASH4Work initiative and a signatory to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's Race to Resilience initiative. Along with its many local partnerships, these global memberships and alliances affirm and inform Diageo's commitment to sustainable water management practices in its operations and supply chains.

Diageo's business case for water stewardship is clear. As its most important production ingredient, water is central to the resilience of its business model. With water scarcity one of its biggest strategic risks, careful resource management is key, and maintaining a licence to operate requires the company to replenish the water it uses. Community engagement is central to Diageo's water management practices, with WASH a crucial lever for engagement. Diageo is also widely recognised as a leader in gender equality and women's economic empowerment.¹⁷

Integrating an inclusion lens into water stewardship practices enables the company to pursue several objectives at once. Recognising that a lack of access to clean WASH facilities disproportionately affects women, girls and people with disabilities, Diageo has increasingly linked its WASH programmes directly to GEDSI. In water-stressed areas, it works with trusted NGO partners, such as WaterAid and CARE International UK, to provide safe and inclusive WASH facilities in communities linked to its production sites and sourcing areas. Every community WASH project sets up water management committees with equal representation from men and women, to help increase women's voices in decision making and water point management.

To facilitate community engagement – and thus ensure programmes are inclusive and accessible – the company supported the development of a GEDSI-aware community engagement toolkit to accompany its water management programmes. It also facilitates community

Useful resources

[WaterAid \(2022\) Integrating gender equality into water, sanitation and hygiene projects: guidance for companies.](#)

[CEO Water Mandate and Water Integrity Network \(2015\) Guide for managing integrity in water stewardship initiatives: a framework for improving effectiveness and transparency.](#)

dialogues to address the social and cultural norms that prevent women's equal access to, and control over, WASH resources and their leadership in water committees. These initiatives are part of Diageo's broader 'Spirit of Progress' plan, which aims to create a more inclusive and sustainable world, with a key focus on water and carbon.¹⁸

Diageo's experience offers some useful lessons for those looking to apply a GEDSI lens to their water stewardship approaches:

- To align social and environmental ambitions, teams need to move out of their silos and actively seek collaboration.
- Success requires a combination of material change and a business commitment to effective water stewardship and inclusive community engagement.
- Be pragmatic: it may be easier to overlay a GEDSI lens on already-funded programmes rather than to design and resource new ones.
- Accept that effective inclusion and representation will probably require addressing social norms, which is not usually a core business skill. Enlist the help of good partners with strong reputations in the community and deep knowledge of prevailing social norms and power structures. Be realistic about NGO partners' resource needs for such complex work.
- To prevent backlash and increased risk of violence, reach out to men and boys on the need for women to participate and lead.
- Be aware that it will be a long time before the impact of this work is visible and investment returns are measurable. Ascertaining attribution to change is also a challenge.

Notes

¹ The Alliance for Water Stewardship defines water stewardship as "the use of water that is socially and culturally equitable, environmentally sustainable and economically beneficial, achieved through a stakeholder-inclusive process that includes both site- and catchment-based actions". Alliance for Water Stewardship, What is water stewardship? <https://a4ws.org/about/what-is-water-stewardship> / ² CEO Water Mandate, What is the mandate? <https://ceowatermandate.org/about/what-is-the-mandate> / ³ CEO Water Mandate, What is the WRC, <https://ceowatermandate.org/resilience/what-is-the-wrc> / ⁴ For more information about water footprints, see Weko, S and Lahn, G (2024) Tackling trade-related water risks: How importing countries can address water stress from global commodity production. Chatham House, London. doi:10.55317/9781784135966. / ⁵ See, for example, the CEO Water Mandate (2014) Corporate water disclosure guidelines. Section 5: Developing a strategic response: external engagement, pp.56–59. / ⁶ UNICEF (2016) UNICEF: Collecting water is often a colossal waste of time for women and girls. Press release, 29 August. / ⁷ United Nations, Why women are key to climate action, www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/climate-issues/women / ⁸ United Nations (2018) UN flagship report on disability and development 2018. / ⁹ Jonkman, SN, Maaskant, B, Boyd, E and Levitan, ML (2009) Loss of life caused by the flooding of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina: analysis of the relationship between flood characteristics and mortality, *Risk Analysis*, 29(5), pp.676–98. doi:10.1111/j.1539-6924.2008.01190.x. / ¹⁰ Government of Japan (2012) Annual report on government measures for persons with disabilities (summary). Column: Earthquake and people with disabilities: mortality rate of people with disabilities in the Great East Japan earthquake. / ¹¹ AP (2025) Which US companies are pulling back on diversity initiatives?, 12 February. / ¹² WaterAid, Equality, inclusion and rights, <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/our-work/equality-inclusion-rights> / ¹³ WaterAid, Women + Water Collaborative, www.wateraid.org/us/women-water-collaborative / ¹⁴ WaterAid, VF Corporation and The VF Foundation, www.wateraid.org/us/vf-foundation-sustainable-wash-cambodia / ¹⁵ Sulzer, Supporting gender equity, www.sulzer.com/en/shared/stories/supporting-gender-equity / ¹⁶ Fair Water Footprints (2022) The Glasgow Declaration for Fair Water Footprints for climate-resilient, inclusive, and sustainable development: a COP26 Initiative, November 2021. / ¹⁷ See, for example, the Equileap Global Gender Equality Report (2024), which ranked Diageo third globally and first in the UK for gender equality. / ¹⁸ For more information, see Diageo, Our spirit of progress plan and targets, www.diageo.com/en/esg/spirit-of-progress-plan

Practical tips for companies

Our research suggests a number of actions companies can take to optimise the benefits of their water stewardship strategy by taking a GEDSI-sensitive approach:

- Make GEDSI non-negotiable by explicitly embedding it into water stewardship policies and setting clear expectations for suppliers and partners.
- Consider water risk through a GEDSI lens by complementing traditional water risk tools with social and gender analyses to identify hidden water risks that standard tools miss.
- Ensure WASH infrastructure is designed for real users, not the 'average worker', to ensure water stewardship improves dignity, safety and productivity.
- Provide suppliers with training, improvement plans and incentives so they can be effective partners in inclusive water stewardship.
- Help shift power dynamics in water governance by working with NGOs that specialise in gender equality, youth and disability inclusion and with local women's and youth groups to ensure inclusion and fair representation in community and basin-level activities.
- Collect disaggregated data and include GEDSI metrics in baseline assessments, monitoring and public reporting.
- Normalise GEDSI in water decisions so it becomes part of how you make water decisions and not just another checklist.

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Knowledge Products

IIED's mission is to build a fairer, more sustainable world, using evidence, action and influence in partnership with others.

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FIND OUT MORE

Our work on this topic is being undertaken as part of the Fair Water Footprints programme, a partnership between governments, the private sector and civil society to transform how the global economy interacts with and values water, by reducing water security vulnerabilities in communities and regions where companies source raw materials and products. It was launched at the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) with the Glasgow Declaration for Fair Water Footprints. Water security affects different groups in different ways, so GEDSI is central to all of the initiative's work. Learn more about the programme at www.fairwaterfootprints.org

