

# Our Rivers, Our Water Future

STRATEGIC PLAN 2018–2022



INTERNATIONAL  
**RIVERS**  
people • water • life



A sunset over a river with trees in the background. The sky is filled with warm, golden-orange light, and the sun's rays are visible. The river reflects the sky and the trees on the far bank. The text is centered over the image.

# About International Rivers





**International Rivers protects rivers  
and defends the rights of communities  
that depend on them.**

**We seek a world where healthy rivers and the rights of local river communities are valued and protected. We envision a world where water and energy needs are met without degrading nature or increasing poverty, and where people have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives.**

**We are a global organization with regional offices in Asia, Africa and Latin America. We work with river-dependent and dam-affected communities to ensure their voices are heard and their rights are respected. We help to build well-resourced, active networks of civil society groups to demonstrate our collective power and create the change we seek. We undertake independent, investigative research, generating robust data and evidence to inform policies and campaigns. We remain independent and fearless in campaigning to expose and resist destructive projects, while also engaging with all relevant stakeholders to develop a vision that protects rivers and the communities that depend upon them.**

**TAPAJÓS RIVER**

A series of dams would flood national parks, reserves and indigenous lands on this major Amazon tributary.

Photo courtesy of International Rivers.





**MEKONG RIVER**

Fishing boats on Mekong River.



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**XINGU RIVER**

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An indigenous Juruna warrior from a village in the Brazilian Amazon.

Photo courtesy of Todd Southgate.





**MEKONG RIVER** | Rapids in Siphandone. Photo courtesy of Pai Deetes/International Rivers.

# Foreword



Water is essential for life on earth. But for too long, river and water defenders—people who've dedicated their lives to protecting our most precious resource—have labored in obscurity, starved of resources, and often facing persecution for their courageous work.

As a result, our waterways have been polluted, neglected and fragmented, transformed from vibrant, connected ecosystems supporting humans and wildlife alike to stagnant dead zones.

The movement to protect a river is often local, but the consequences of failing to protect a river are global: displacement, food insecurity, loss of biodiversity. And yet global decision-makers have often overlooked rivers in their conservation work.

Healthy rivers feed our most vulnerable people, sustain some of our most diverse ecosystems, protect us from floods and droughts, and are central to the cultural identity of so many people around the world. It's time to galvanize policymakers to understand the critical importance of rivers—and to finally make firm commitments to protect them.

As we embark upon this new era at International Rivers, we are ready to deliver this transformation. In the past three decades, we've grown from a small group of volunteers into a global organization with offices in every region where we work. We will

mobilize our vast networks, armed with cutting-edge research, to change how governments and corporations operate. We believe in the power of people to achieve great change.

We must seize this moment to protect the world's life-giving waterways, because they are fundamental to the health and wellbeing of our people and this planet. And they will help us survive the coming climate chaos: Healthy rivers with intact floodplains are our best defense against the increasingly frequent and severe floods and droughts wrought by climate change.

This is a challenging time, with repressive governments on the rise and climate change threatening. But rivers and water provide a new vision—one of cooperation across boundaries. We are inspired by the many water defenders finding creative and innovative ways to achieve tangible impact, even under corrupt, authoritarian regimes.


We are in the midst of a major energy transformation—one that will take us from environmentally destructive, centralized models of energy generation to decentralized solutions that empower communities while protecting the environment. We look forward to finding a new way forward together.

**Kate Horner**  
Executive Director









# Our Rivers, Our Water Future

LOWER OMO RIVER

Girl from Lebuk farm village collects  
water from flooded plain.

Photo courtesy of Alison M. Jones for  
[www.nowater-nolife.org](http://www.nowater-nolife.org)





**ENE RIVER** | The Asháninka collect and share food on the Ene River in Peru. Photo courtesy of Tomás Muñita.

**Rivers are essential to all life on the planet. Free-flowing rivers work like arteries, providing the world’s ecosystems with critical freshwater resources. These resources nurture the animal and plant life within rivers, recharge fertility in floodplains and provide nutrients to delta, estuarine and near-shore reefs. Rivers sustain extensive fisheries globally, with freshwater fisheries estimated to feed up to 550 million people, while river floodplains feed hundreds of millions more.<sup>1</sup> Rivers are a source of magnificent biodiversity, and a refuge for endangered species.**

Healthy rivers and watersheds also play a crucial role in climate change mitigation and adaptation.<sup>2</sup> Rivers and streams, together with surrounding forests, act as natural buffers to increasingly serious floods and droughts. As part of the Earth’s circulatory system, the world’s rivers transport carbon originating in decaying organic material and eroded rock from land to the ocean. In doing so, rivers help to reduce the amount of carbon that returns to the atmosphere in the form of heat-trapping carbon dioxide. Nature depends on healthy rivers—and so do we. The United Nations has declared that water scarcity is one of the most urgent problems facing human societies this century. The World Economic Forum has described global water crises as “the biggest threat facing the planet over the next decade”.<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis has stated that access to safe drinking water must be addressed as a basic human right.<sup>4</sup> And yet the fundamental role of healthy rivers and watersheds in providing access to safe drinking water, food and other basic human rights has not received the attention it deserves.

**Our great rivers—dammed, diverted, polluted**

We cannot survive without healthy

rivers, yet freshwater ecosystems around the globe are under threat. Most of the world’s great rivers have been dammed, diverted, over-tapped or polluted. In the last 40 years, the fish, amphibians, reptiles, mammals and birds that inhabit our rivers and lakes have, on average, lost more than 81% of their population.<sup>5</sup> These freshwater species are declining more than twice as fast as land-based and marine species.<sup>6</sup> Less than 10% of the world’s largest river basins are protected.<sup>7</sup>

Dams are fragmenting rivers and ecosystems, driving an unprecedented loss of freshwater habitat and biodiversity. Much of the variety of freshwater life is determined by the connections formed between different parts of a river basin. Despite well-documented dangers, more than 3,700 hydropower projects are planned or under construction on the world’s rivers. If built, they could block free-flowing rivers by more than 20%.<sup>8</sup> The implications are critical: freshwater ecosystems sustain a higher biodiversity per square mile than almost any other ecosystem.<sup>9</sup> Their fisheries are crucial to food security and livelihoods for millions of people.<sup>10</sup> Large, destructive dam projects can permanently alter an entire watershed, displacing tens of thousands of people





**ZAMBEZI RIVER** | The Kariba Dam blocks the Zambezi River. Photo courtesy of Joe McKenna.

**'THE UNITED NATIONS HAS DECLARED THAT WATER SCARCITY IS ONE OF THE MOST URGENT PROBLEMS FACING HUMAN SOCIETIES THIS CENTURY.'**

from their lands, decimating fisheries and biodiversity, starving cropland and deltas of life-giving sediment, and emitting methane, one of the more damaging greenhouse gases. Water security is recognized as a global priority, with tensions around water management a reality within and between countries.

**Ecosystems and river communities—the first to lose**

Many of the rivers we seek to protect are transboundary—running through and shared by multiple countries. Fresh water—from rivers and groundwater—has fed a massive expansion of agriculture throughout the world's fertile basins. This in turn has allowed populations to boom, while urban centers and industrial activities have expanded, requiring more and more water.

Rivers have been central to growth and dams have been a key part of this expansion. But damming rivers has a huge cost as well—extracting water away from rivers has fed tensions between countries, and in the last century damming rivers for power production has become a lucrative option for driving energy systems and industrial development. When dams are built

and water is taken for energy, this puts pressure on the other users and uses of water. At times this pressure erupts in open conflict, but more often it is experienced as a geopolitical breakdown between countries or a fight between users and sectors. When this happens, the ecosystems and the people of the river basin are the first to lose. Dam builders, often operating in weak governance regimes, routinely run afoul of national laws and policies with little accountability for the damage done and resources wasted. With billions of dollars on the line and vast opportunity to hide improper practices in long, complex technical processes, large-scale hydropower projects are particularly prone to corruption. Poor governance fosters a culture of impunity that has allowed river defenders to be threatened or killed for their activism.

International law exists to help manage rivers in the interests of all countries with a shared ownership and responsibility for rivers' water and resources. For example, the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention<sup>11</sup> (effective 2014) codifies customary norms for cooperative management. Key guidelines have been negotiated through multi-stakeholder processes such as the World Commission on Dams. The hydropower industry itself





**TELES PIRES RIVER** | At the São Manoel Dam construction site on Brazil's Teles Pires River in 2015. Photo courtesy of Caio Mota/Forum.

developed a Sustainability Protocol in which it recognizes the unacceptable nature of the impacts of its business on human rights, societies and the environment.<sup>12</sup> Across these contexts, there is a growing recognition that environmental and social costs and benefits must be counted equally alongside the economic ones. Yet key processes such as strategic environmental assessments and international norms, including the right to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent of Indigenous Peoples, while increasingly recognized on paper by key dam stakeholders, are rarely implemented effectively.

### **Better ways to produce energy**

Rivers basins around the world are suffering under massive dam construction projects, despite social movements, local peoples and even neighboring governments challenging the projects for their transboundary impacts. Independent scientific and economic assessments have clearly shown these dams are damaging ecosystems and economies. While International Rivers' flagship campaigns have achieved great

coverage and influence over the issues and those involved, across the world destructive projects continue to be proposed. This is the context for our 2018–2022 Strategic Plan.

Hydropower dams are embedded in many countries' energy systems. Yet there are far too few healthy rivers left to justify any more large hydropower projects. Renewable technologies—wind and solar in particular—are booming across the globe as proven technologies replacing older, less sustainable, more polluting ways of producing power. Now, as power storage is being added into our systems in multiple forms, these newer renewables are reaching equal affordability with coal and other traditional energy sources such as dams. And dams have been shown over and over to be prone to cost blowouts.<sup>13</sup> Investment in these renewables is also growing as markets across the globe look to support new technologies and better ways to produce energy. Yet new financing in the form of emerging development banks and climate finance mechanisms appear to be prioritizing large-scale hydropower projects—even while newer, greener technologies exist.

### **Achieving positive change**

Despite these significant pressures, International Rivers is achieving positive change for rivers and river communities. Armed with on-the-ground evidence and cutting-edge research, we are mobilizing civil society and communities to advocate for improved river basin governance, transparent and accountable energy infrastructure, healthy ecosystems and human rights. And we are supporting communities affected by dams to achieve redress for past and ongoing harm, and to realize their rights when living with damaging infrastructure.

We are campaigning to protect the world's great rivers from harmful projects. We are championing effective policies at national, basin and global scales and we are influencing the private sector to adopt standards and safeguards.

The momentum is building against destructive dams and for river protections. International Rivers' Strategic Plan for 2018–2022 outlines how we will make sure that momentum grows in strength and that our rivers remain healthy for future generations.



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**ENE RIVER**

Asháninka children watch the Ene River in Peru.

Photo courtesy of Tomás Muñita.



# Our approach to impact

## MEKONG RIVER

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The fish catch along the Siphandone, a 50-kilometer labyrinth of braided channels, islands and sandbars in Laos.

Photo courtesy of Pai Deetes/  
International Rivers.







**ENE RIVER** | Children drink masato on the shores of the Ene River. Photo courtesy of Tomás Muñita.

**Since 1985, International Rivers has been at the heart of the global struggle to protect rivers and the rights of communities that depend on them.**

**A global presence...**

The world has changed dramatically since our founding over thirty years ago, with emerging economies taking on increased prominence in global governance. In response to this shifting reality, we have transformed as an organization, establishing regional offices in China, India, Brazil, Thailand and South Africa. We recognize the necessity of empowering local leadership to shape development and environmental outcomes, and

ultimately achieve our mission. Our global presence has helped us better understand local challenges and opportunities, and is enabling us to better support vibrant civil society leaders and movements, strengthen relationships with key stakeholders, and influence decision-makers.

**... to solve global problems**

Water stress affects more than two billion people around the globe, a figure that is projected to rise. Change in current practices for governing and managing our rivers and freshwater resources is overdue. Globally there has been a growing awareness of this need: The World Economic Forum has described global water crises as “the biggest threat facing the planet over the next decade.” The United Nations has declared that water scarcity is one of the most urgent problems facing human societies this century. The

UN’s Sustainable Development Goals include freshwater restoration and transboundary river governance as key targets in achieving sustainable and equitable global development.

We know that the status quo on water management and the ongoing exploitation of our rivers is not an option. While many divergent pathways are emerging, consensus is growing about the urgent need to act to ensure sustainable freshwater access for all. We know that the involvement of river communities, NGOs and civil society will be key to the success of these global initiatives, particularly in managing resources and setting a vision for our rivers and freshwater resources. We are using our deep knowledge of on-the-ground realities in river communities to drive global analysis and shape solutions that put rivers and watershed protections at the forefront of solutions.





**JURUENA RIVER** | Apiaká map the Juruena River in Brazil. Photo courtesy of Brent Millikan/International Rivers.

## **Our approach to deliver impact**

How change happens is important. Throughout our work, we believe these core components are critical to deliver impact and achieve our goals.

### **Community voices matter.**

We work with river-dependent and dam-affected communities to ensure their voices are heard and their rights are respected. The communities who live near and depend upon rivers have generations of experience fishing in and farming alongside their rivers, and they are the first to witness and suffer from the problems wrought by runaway fragmentation. Any solution to the freshwater crisis must deeply involve the communities who are being impacted, both drawing on their knowledge, wisdom and experience and addressing their needs and concerns. Our regional teams have spent decades developing relationships with these communities so that we can amplify their voices on the global stage to shape stronger policies.

### **Networks and movements build power.**

Rivers are not just about freshwater, or dams. They are vital for farms and fisheries, energy and sanitation, economic development, biodiversity and fighting the climate crisis. Diverse coalitions and strong alliances are key to success. We help build well-resourced, active networks of civil society groups to demonstrate our collective power and create the change we seek. We provide technical expertise and campaigning support. We help our networks understand the global trends in hydropower and financing sectors, and monitor and campaign on projects that affect the world's major rivers and ecosystems. We collaborate with a wide network of partners in civil society, academia, the media and other sectors to implement innovative approaches and timely, influential strategies. We catalyze local and international experts to advise and support the movement.

### **Evidence and data drive change.**

Robust data and evidence is necessary to guide change. We undertake cutting-edge research and on-the-ground investigations informed by the experience of river-dependent and dam-affected communities to inform policy recommendations. We carry out primary and participatory research on the value of river ecosystems as well as the impacts of dams and fragmentation on communities, ecosystems and sustainable development. We value indigenous traditional knowledge and community-generated research alongside institutional research by academics, policymakers and NGOs.

### **Engage stakeholders, maintain independence.**

We have a track record of achieving significant conservation and livelihood impact by shifting the policies and practices of financiers, governments, and the private sector. We remain independent and fearless in campaigning to expose and resist destructive projects, while also engaging with all relevant stakeholders to develop a vision that protects rivers and the communities that depend upon them.



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**OU RIVER**

Photo courtesy of  
Sabrina Gyorvary

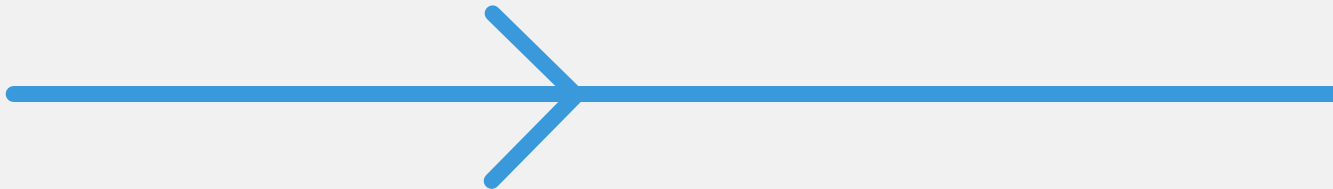


# How we achieve impact.



## Context for our work

Freshwater is essential to life.  
Rivers are the arteries and veins of our freshwater systems.  
Freshwater and rivers face significant pressures across the globe.



## Response

International Rivers has built a responsive, global presence,  
connected to river communities and civil society partners.







# Regional context for change

## Africa

### DROUGHT CRIPPLES DAMS, BOOSTS SOLAR AND WIND

Significant climate change-related drought reduces hydropower generation across the continent, even as investors and dam builders eye scaling up hydropower in Africa. World Bank cancels its involvement in Inga 3 Dam, and solar and wind power make inroads, reducing prices and increasing energy access. Community movements to protect rivers grow.

## Global

**ENERGY SHIFT** | Solar and wind power become cost-competitive and scalable, driving a radical shift in energy systems.

**INFRASTRUCTURE BOOM** | A global boom in infrastructure spending takes off, led by China, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the BRICS Bank and the G20 among others.

**DECOMMISSIONED DAMS** | The United States, once the driver of the global dam boom, begins a series of high-profile dam removals.

**RIGHTS OF RIVERS RECOGNIZED** | A wave of recognition of the rights of rivers and indigenous peoples sweeps around the world, from New Zealand to India and Australia.

**WATER AS GLOBAL PRIORITY** | The UN's Sustainable Development Goals, adopted in 2015, mandate protection and restoration of "water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes."

## Latin America

### REPRESSION AND RIVER PROTECTION

Growing repression leads to the murder of indigenous activist and river defender Berta Cáceres; violence and intimidation against environmental defenders on the rise. Chile, Peru, Brazil and Guatemala take one step towards protecting their rivers by cancelling hydropower projects. Brazil's Lava Jato investigation uncovers widespread corruption in hydropower sector.



A world map with three callout boxes. The first box, for China, is a large circle at the top left. The second box, for South Asia, is a circle at the bottom left. The third box, for South East Asia, is a circle at the bottom right. Lines connect each box to its corresponding geographical region on the map. China is highlighted in a darker blue, while South Asia and South East Asia are highlighted in a lighter blue. The rest of the world map is in a very light blue.

## China

### A RETURN TO ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES IN MIDST OF EXPANSION |

China works to reduce its carbon footprint while simultaneously driving global infrastructure expansion. It opens new legal avenues for public participation in environmental protection and designates “river chiefs” to resurrect the country’s ailing rivers. The free-flowing Nu River is protected from development through 2020 in latest Five Year Plan.

## South Asia

### GROWING IMPULSE TO PROTECT RIVERS |

India and Bhutan begin to require river basin planning, as strong community movements and dodgy economics help stall or cancel new dam projects. Narmada Valley villages threatened by more inundation from dams. Drought imperils South Asia’s iconic rivers, raising awareness of freshwater issues. Indian courts grant living entity status to the Ganges, Yamuna and Narmada rivers. River restoration in Bangladesh revives the iconic and threatened “hilsa” fish.

## South East Asia

### FOOD SECURITY CRISIS LOOMS

Despite a recommended ten-year moratorium on new dams, Laos moves forward with hydropower projects on the Mekong, weakening regional cooperation, including the Mekong River Commission. River communities step up to protect the Mekong and Salween, with mixed success. A food security crisis looms for 65 million people dependent on the Mekong fisheries threatened by dam construction.



# Our goals to protect rivers and rights

To protect rivers and the rights of river communities, we need to influence how rivers are governed, how they are protected in law, and how they are valued through planning and management. By gaining lasting protections for the world's rivers, we can realize our vision for healthy rivers that sustain life and the communities that depend on them. The following six goals will guide our work in making this a reality.

1. **Strengthen movements for healthy rivers**
2. **Ensure corporations are accountable in policy and practice**
3. **Promote clean and fair finance for energy and water solutions**
4. **Secure human rights for river communities and water protectors**
5. **Support equitable and effective governance that sustains rivers**
6. **Gain permanent legal protections for the world's iconic rivers**

These goals are interconnected: Achieving progress in one will contribute to outcomes in another. The strategies that support them align our efforts towards better river governance globally—an outcome that will result in permanent protections of rivers for our future well-being, and that of the planet and its natural systems.

Achieving these goals will mean that:

- Rivers can perform their critical ecosystem functions in an era of climate change.
- Rivers, especially transboundary rivers, are governed by effective, transparent, accountable and participatory processes and institutions, which uphold the critical ecosystem functions of rivers and respect the rights of river communities.

- Destructive dams proposed on river mainstems, and destructive dams where other critical economic, social or environmental impacts cannot be avoided or mitigated, are stopped.
- Rivers that are degraded by dams are re-regulated so that basin ecosystems—including watersheds, floodplains, groundwater, and delta and estuarine systems—can function. This means the way in which dams are operated may need to change, or that dams are decommissioned.

We will ensure we are set up to deliver success—and to achieve the strategic goals outlined in this plan—by monitoring and evaluating our impact, and regularly assessing our progress.





#### OU RIVER

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A fisherman navigates the Ou River.

Photo courtesy of Sabrina Gyorvary/  
International Rivers.



# Our goals



## **Goal 1**

### **Strengthen movements for healthy rivers**

By 2022, river movements around the globe will be connected, informed and working in solidarity; made up of diverse civil society partners rooted in communities, they will be effective in protecting rivers and community rights in each major riverbasin.



## **Goal 2**

### **Ensure corporations are accountable in policy and practice**

By 2022, private sector, government and financiers involved in developing and managing water infrastructure will be accountable – respecting human rights of communities and preserving riverbasin ecosystems in their policy frameworks and in their practice.



## **Goal 5**

### **Support equitable and effective governance that sustains rivers**

By 2022, the governance of rivers, including transboundary rivers, is effective, transparent, and accountable; processes are participatory, rights and responsibilities are identified and protected in law, and improved governance leads to management outcomes that support ecosystem functions.





### **Goal 3**

#### **Promote clean and fair finance for energy and water solutions**

By 2022, financing for renewables will have substantially increased as a percentage of energy investments, with a consequent significant reduction in funding for large hydropower – meaning that new energy investments increasingly do no harm to rivers, delivering sustainable water and energy solutions which make significant contribution to addressing climate change.



### **Goal 4**

#### **Secure human rights for river communities and water protectors**

By 2022, more communities whose livelihoods are affected by water infrastructure will have meaningful avenues for advocacy, redress for harm and options for renewing their livelihoods; and water protectors who fight destructive projects, speak out about abuse and expose impacts do so without fear of threat or repercussions



### **Goal 6**

#### **Gain permanent legal protections for the world's iconic rivers**

By 2022, transboundary rivers in Asia and Latin America will have achieved permanent legal protections that recognise traditional river uses and community access to freshwater and its resources; and protects the waterway from future large scale impoundments, extractions or diversions. In other riverbasins communal rights to water and river resources are recognized and realized.





# Goal 1

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**Strengthen movements for healthy rivers**

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**By 2022, river movements around the world will be connected, informed and working in solidarity. These movements will comprise diverse civil society partners rooted in communities and they will be effective in protecting rivers and community rights in each major river basin.**

**Why?**

While global challenges such as climate change and deforestation have benefitted from sustained, concerted campaigns to raise awareness and articulate solutions, global consensus in the fight to protect freshwater resources remains under-developed and fragmented.

International Rivers has supported a global movement of dam-affected peoples and their allies since our founding. Our most notable victories for river protections have emerged from fights against destructive dams and have successfully influenced political decision-making. These have often been collective achievements, strengthened through diversity, and the result of strong and interconnected movements. They have often drawn together unexpected or non-traditional allies.

We need strong movements to achieve the scale of transformative change for river conservation that we seek. Strong movements are made up of capable, networked, informed and well-resourced community partners, NGOs, informal groups, academics, individuals and allies who are committed to a shared goal. International Rivers will work with allies to articulate a shared global agenda, galvanizing a global social movement to protect rivers and watersheds. Where useful in

coalescing collective action, we will align with global initiatives.

Our work to support movements has been most visible through our three “Rivers for Life” meetings, which brought together river activists from around the world, but our work to support movements looks different in each region, specific to context and opportunity. We know that support for indigenous and ethnic minority networks is a priority, and inclusive strategies will ensure that women and men have equal opportunity to engage in networks and take on leadership roles.

Responding to the needs and maturity of existing movements or networks, our approach is diverse and context-specific to movements and networks in different basins.

**To achieve this goal, we will:**

- Help to build a global consensus and momentum toward a shared agenda for river protections, facilitating coalitions and participating in networks.
- Attract financial and other resources to support partner organizations and social movements and help coordinate philanthropic support for river communities and movements.
- Ensure a strong, globally-connected river movement that’s formed around NGO partners rooted in communities and local movements, and effective in protecting rivers and defending communities’ rights and territories.
- Create a shared understanding of the role healthy rivers play in sustaining critical ecosystems and communities in an era of climate change through rigorous research and effective communications.
- Link local activists with other experts in specific fields, and facilitate exchanges and exposure between river-dependent peoples and their NGO supporters.

**As a result:**

- Diverse constituencies will make up networks of civil society organizations focused on river protections, working towards common outcomes for rivers and communities.
- Each network will have the resources to lead river protection campaigns and monitor large-scale threats to river health in at least one major river basin, and the capacity to engage in international processes that impact river health.
- Each network will have leadership and structures that ensure accountability to the communities they serve and equitable, inclusive leaders—men and women—who represent the diversity of communities.
- Each network will develop a community-based research plan and support communities to exercise their rights to healthy rivers.
- Each network will have access to experts for technical support and connections with local and international journalists to highlight priority issues. Networks will maintain regular communications, strengthening global solidarity in support of river protection.

**OMO RIVER**

Three generations of women look out over the Omo River in Ethiopia.

Photo courtesy of Alison M. Jones/[nowater-nolife.org](http://nowater-nolife.org)





# Goal 2

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**Ensure corporations are accountable in  
policy and practice**

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**By 2022, private sector entities and state-owned enterprises involved in developing and operating water infrastructure will be accountable—respecting human rights of communities and preserving river basin ecosystems in their policy frameworks and practice.**

**Why?**

Many interests compete for access and control over water. Given its considerable economic value, water is increasingly treated as a commodity, yet it is also a human right and its inherent properties underpin life and ecosystems.

Globally, governments have enabled the private sector to play a direct role in water management and provision, develop water infrastructure, and operate it for profit. In some places, surface water is now managed through market mechanisms, while in others, treaties and laws inform how water and rivers are governed. National governments are directly involved in enabling private sector operations and access to water resources. Often this is done in a fragmented way sector by sector, which exacerbates competition for water resources and all too regularly undermines water's and rivers' environmental, social and cultural value.

However, expectations for accountability and shared responsibility by the private sector have grown considerably over recent years. The United Nations Business and Human Rights framework, for example, says that corporations bear direct responsibility for upholding human rights. As such, growing norms see business and government sharing responsibilities for human rights impacts. Yet in countries where legal and policy frameworks protecting rivers and people are weak, many foreign private sector developers—bound by robust legal regimes when operating at home—exploit these weaknesses to maximize profit.

In addition to international sector standards and policy requirements—often set by governments through financial mechanisms such as the development banks—national laws provide minimum requirements for social and environmental impact protections. In some cases, treaties between countries will set operational limits to private sector development or water use. Nevertheless, dam builders routinely run afoul of even weak national laws and policies with little accountability for the social and environmental damage done. In this situation, governments have a responsibility to their citizens—and to rivers—to require redress for harms done.

**To achieve this goal, we will:**

- Monitor compliance and advocate for company commitments to the highest international laws, standards and policies, such as those articulated in our Dam Standards guidebook.<sup>14</sup>
- Update and expand application of our assessment methodology

to evaluate company policy and performance in environmental management, community and labor relations, and risk management.

- Document poor performance in specific projects and advocate for redress, including through the judicial system.
- Monitor and expose projects that harm the environment and undermine human rights to influence the private sector and its supporters.
- Engage in dialogue and debates with governments and financiers about standards and safeguards for the private sector.

**As a result:**

- The hydropower sector will have improved environmental and social policy standards and performance.
- Companies will be more transparent in their operations and engage in meaningful dialogue with impacted peoples, communities, NGOs and civil society stakeholders.
- Governments and financiers will have increased expectations of private sector dam developers' policies, capacities and practice.

**SALWEEN RIVER**

Farmers transplant rice along the Thai side of the Salween River.

Photo courtesy of Sabrina Gyorvary/International Rivers.





# Goal 3

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**Promote clean and fair finance  
for energy and water solutions**

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**By 2022, energy financing institutions will have increased non-hydropower renewables as a percentage of their energy investments from 2015 levels (US\$308.7 billion)<sup>15</sup> and reduced funding for large hydropower projects from 2015 levels (\$44.9 billion). New energy investments and financing mechanisms increasingly protect rivers, delivering sustainable water and energy solutions that make a significant contribution to addressing climate change.**

**Why?**

Securing a clean, fair and climate-resilient future will require massive investment in sustainable water and energy solutions. Financial institutions and mechanisms—government, government owned<sup>16</sup> and private —have a considerable role to play in addressing climate change. To stave off the most devastating impacts of an ever-worsening climate crisis, the world must radically shift financial flows away from wasteful and harmful projects towards cleaner, safer approaches.

This transformational finance must be built on integrated basin planning that transparently and fairly allocates water across different stakeholders. Investments must assess and deploy new technologies that deliver energy while enhancing ecosystem connectivity and sustainability at a basin scale.

Large hydropower projects are immensely capital intensive, draining resources from decentralized, accessible and cleaner sources. Most of the costs accrue upfront. Finance is therefore a critical component of any such project. Generally, financiers have lower vested interests in building large dams than government bureaucracies and dam builders. Financiers also tend to be sensitive to risk.

Hydropower projects consistently exceed projected budgets and schedules, and developers underestimate environmental and social costs. Public utilities receive less revenue when projects don't produce as much power as expected, thus impacting borrowers' ability to repay loans. Governments are left on the hook, unable to repay their loans or deliver energy to their citizens. Dams are also particularly prone to corruption.<sup>17</sup>

Dams are already producing less power than expected as increased droughts and floods disrupt flow regimes. The situation is likely to deteriorate further as climate change wreaks havoc on river hydrology, further worsening an already bleak financial risk outlook for large hydropower projects.

In the past ten years, the landscape of dam financiers, and energy financing in general, has become increasingly diverse. Existing and new mechanisms are prioritizing investing in renewables, and the hydropower industry is aggressively positioning itself to access these funding streams. Concurrently, massive investment is being mobilized to address outstanding infrastructure needs around the world.

**To achieve this goal, we will:**

- Document and expose the financial risk of investing in large hydropower infrastructure, including cost overruns, as well as risks of poor project performance due to weak social and environmental assessments or sustained community resistance.

- Monitor the lending and operational safeguards of multilateral development banks, including emerging institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank, as well as national development banks and nascent climate finance mechanisms. Where necessary, we will campaign against investments supporting destructive dams.
- Undertake independent research to provide a credible pathway to clean, decentralized energy and water infrastructure.
- Support financiers and financial mechanisms that catalyze further investment in renewable technologies such as wind, solar and off-river storage, and which support energy security for poor and marginalized communities.

**As a result:**

- Financing institutions and governments will increase investment in energy and water infrastructure that protects the environment, respects human rights, and increases energy access.
- Private finance, institutional investors and international financial institutions stop lending to large hydropower infrastructure. Investors establish operational policies mandating divestment from the sector.
- Leading financiers require adherence to democratic planning processes in the water and energy sectors to respect the rights of affected people. They prioritize projects that increase access to electricity for poor people and those living in remote areas.
- Leading financiers will have stopped all lending to new destructive dam projects.
- International climate finance mechanisms exclude large hydropower projects.

**SALWEEN RIVER**

A Karen woman fishes in a small stream that feeds into the Salween River.

Photo courtesy of Sabrina Gyorvary/  
International Rivers.



# Goal 4

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**Secure human rights for river communities and water protectors**

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**By 2022, communities whose livelihoods are affected by water infrastructure will have meaningful avenues for advocacy, redress for harm and options for renewing their livelihoods. By 2021, water protectors who fight destructive projects, speak out about abuse and expose impacts will be able to do so without fear of threat or repercussions.**

**Why?**

Throughout our history, International Rivers has highlighted the impact of hydropower development on human rights, including the civil and political rights of citizens, and on rights relating to river-dependent livelihoods, access to natural resources and cultural connection to place.

In recent years, the silencing, disappearance and assassination of environmental and indigenous defenders has become tragically common. On average, three people are killed every week defending their land, forests and waterways against the expansion of large-scale agriculture, dams, mining, logging, and other threats.<sup>18</sup> In countries where human rights abuses are rife, indigenous and local communities face enormous risks when they stand up to the powerful interests behind proposed infrastructure and extractive projects.

River protectors have come under threat for their opposition to large hydropower projects. These attacks are particularly egregious in Central and South America, but also severely impact people's rights to organize and speak out in many parts of Asia and Africa. In 2015, at least 185 activists were killed, 15 of whom were involved in activism related to hydroelectric

dams.<sup>19</sup> To change this situation, we must remove the impunity for corporations and governments that enables such attacks.

Violations of rights around hydropower projects occur at a community-wide level, such as through the forced displacement of communities and failure to meaningfully consult with and gain consent from affected communities. They are also occurring at an individual level through loss of home and livelihood and violence towards and arrest of community activists who stand in the way of hydropower development. Human rights violations in the hydropower sector disproportionately impact indigenous peoples.<sup>20</sup>

To effectively resist harmful infrastructure and ensure participatory decision-making over water resources, communities must be free to voice their concerns and aspirations for their future.

**To achieve this goal, we will:**

- Document and monitor projects where rights violations are occurring so that corporations—and any other responsible parties—redress harm, and the hydropower sector as a whole improves its practices to ensure human rights are respected.
- Identify strategies and make recommendations within the hydropower sector that will strengthen national, regional and international instruments for human rights protections.
- Support project-affected peoples to seek redress for human rights impacts through the complaints and grievance mechanisms of financiers and companies and through the use of legal recourse.

**As a result:**

- National and international actors in the hydropower sector will recognize community rights to fresh water and livelihoods. Governments will recognize and meaningfully implement the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent and territorial and resource rights for indigenous peoples, and all hydropower developers will respect these rights.
- Corporations improve human rights compliance through greater use of human rights impact assessments.
- Communities we work with can use effective national, regional and international instruments for human rights protections.
- Communities are safe, secure and meaningfully consulted on development that affects their waters, lands, lives and livelihoods, and individual river and water protectors can speak out without fear of violence, jail or retribution.

**BARGNY COAST**

Bargny Coast Water Keepers in Senegal hold pictures of Honduran environmental activist and water protector Berta Cáceres during International Day of Action for Rivers.

Photo courtesy of Bargny Coast Water Keepers.



An aerial photograph of a valley with terraced rice fields. The fields are arranged in a series of curved, stepped terraces that follow the contours of the hills. A river flows through the center of the valley, and several dirt roads wind through the landscape. The overall scene is lush and green, with a mix of cultivated land and natural vegetation.

# Goal 5

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**Support equitable and effective governance  
that sustains rivers**

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**By 2022, the governance of rivers, including transboundary rivers, is effective, transparent and accountable, informed by comprehensive basin planning. Processes are participatory, rights and responsibilities are identified and protected in law, and improved governance leads to management outcomes that support ecosystem functions.**

**Why?**

Transparent, accountable and participatory governance of water resources is necessary for sustainable development. Many of the challenges facing the world's rivers arise from weak and ineffective water governance. Decisions affecting millions of people are too often made behind closed doors or by a select few in government.

In many basin situations, there is a dearth of planning. Where plans exist, they often reference the interests and development vision of one sector's use of water resources, undervaluing other uses and needs, and give the environment and ecosystems low priority. In this context, planning and governance processes too often occur with severely restricted access to information for river communities and the general public. This leaves key stakeholder groups uninformed and unable to have a voice in decisions that may leave them hungry, displaced, without work or with their livelihoods critically undermined.

Improving river basin governance includes the people, processes and institutions—political, social, cultural, environmental and economic—involved

and active in management and use of water, land and related resources. It particularly looks at the processes of use and development of rivers' water resources, as well as the protections, laws and regulations that overlay them.

Improvements will be realized through more inclusive processes that address existing power imbalances. Dam-affected peoples must have an ongoing and meaningful role in river governance and decision-making.

Seeking improvements will mean addressing power imbalances in three contexts. Firstly, between different users within the country: energy, agriculture, natural ecosystems and local and indigenous peoples—what has been characterized as the nexus between water, land and energy. Secondly, between countries, considering transboundary governance. And thirdly, between those with power in society and institutions (from the political to the household level) and those without, in particular indigenous peoples, minorities and women.

**To achieve this goal, we will:**

- Work with peoples' movements and civil society networks to engage with river governance processes.
- Increase information available to project-affected communities and their civil society supporters on governance issues as well as facilitate cross-border information exchange between all stakeholders.
- Promote planning at basin and transboundary scales, which considers cumulative impacts and integrated resource use and protections.
- Undertake and disseminate primary and collaborative analysis of river governance issues, sharing practical examples of good governance to inform better cooperation between governments and other river basin stakeholders.

- Document examples where national and transboundary governance frameworks are not working for communities and ecosystem sustainability, and develop an evidence base that demonstrates why including marginalized people and groups achieves better river governance and sustainable development.

**As a result:**

- River basins will be governed by transparent and accountable institutions and processes, where plans for water use and project development that affect water access consider all stakeholder interests equally.
- River communities and civil society will be meaningfully engaged in governance processes and decision-making, including planning, management and project feasibility assessments—meaning that these stakeholders have access to information and a role in decisions over their water and resources.
- Credible institutions that encourage and enforce upstream, basin-wide planning, including transboundary cooperative management approaches, are created and strengthened.





# Goal 6

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**Gain permanent legal protections for the world's iconic rivers**

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## **By 2022, rivers will have legal protections that recognize the rights of river communities and ensure critical ecosystem functions are preserved.**

### **Why?**

Legal protections for natural resources and community rights to river waters are unclear, weak or insufficient. And even when dams are canceled, rivers are still vulnerable to future projects. Permanent legal protections for ecologically and socially important and vulnerable river ecosystems are necessary to ensure the long-term health and viability of rivers and the communities that depend on them.

Protections need to be considered on a basin and catchment scale to ensure that watershed mountain and forest environments are included, as well as the floodplains, deltas, estuaries and near-shore coastal habitats. Changes to rivers through dams, other water infrastructure and extractions affect the system well beyond the immediate environs of the built structures.

### **To achieve this goal, we will:**

- Prioritize key rivers that present the strongest need and greatest opportunity for permanent legal protection. Evaluate the feasibility for legal protections in river basins in regions where we work. Prioritize rivers considering the following criteria:
  - existing and threatened biodiversity;
  - importance of a river to food security and livelihoods of local populations;
  - commitment of indigenous peoples to river conservation;
  - existing fragmentation or threats from additional dams or infrastructure;
  - feasibility of additional protections;
  - potential to link future river conservation to existing protected systems;
  - political opportunity with aligned interests of stakeholder groups;
- Build a diverse political constituency to support river protection.
- Develop a scientific evidence base to justify legal protections of priority rivers.
- Collaborate with legal experts to develop nationally-specific legal models for achieving protections.

### **As a result:**

- Legal pathways to permanently protect rivers are developed in key regions and countries.
- New, informed, active coalitions support permanent river protection.
- Access to river basin data is improved.
- At least five free-flowing rivers are permanently protected.



# Our goals to enhance our organizational capabilities

**To achieve our mission, we need a strong organization working with a clear strategy. The following four organizational goals will ensure the quality of our programs and inform our governance. Importantly, they will also help us to focus our energies and shared efforts so that we are on a strong footing, able to shape and seize the opportunities for river protections and deliver responsive campaigns that support the rights of river communities.**

## SALWEEN RIVER

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A woman pans for gold along the Upper Salween River.

Photo courtesy of Pai Deetes/  
International Rivers.







# Organizational Goal 1

## Enhance our programs through improved monitoring and evaluation



Photo courtesy of Sabrina Gyrovary/International Rivers.

### We will invest in building strong programs that are informed by regular monitoring and strategic evaluations.

#### Why?

Over our more than 30-year history, International Rivers has achieved countless victories and supported scores of community activists to defend their rights. However, we have dedicated paltry resources to documenting this impact. Programmatic evaluation has been largely anecdotal and ad hoc. Robust monitoring and evaluation systems improve transparency and accountability, and inform ongoing strategic decision making.

Effective monitoring is a systematic and long-term process that gathers information on a project as it is implemented. By monitoring a project, we can make visible, in real time, the progress we are making towards our goals and adjust our strategies as

needed. Evaluations are performed to judge whether a project or program has reached its goals and delivered what was expected according to its original plan.

Through improved monitoring and evaluation, we can build a strong, global evidence base on the value of rivers and emerging threats to them, and assess the wide range of interventions being implemented to address them. We can identify and document successful programs and approaches and track progress toward common indicators across related projects. We can strengthen our understanding of the many threats to our rivers and the success of our approach, while identifying the most valuable and efficient use of our resources. And we can better communicate our successes—as well as our challenges and how we will overcome them—to our allies, supporters and donors.

#### To achieve this goal, we will:

- Dedicate organizational resources to monitoring impact and evaluating performance.
- Develop a baseline from which to analyze outcomes and impacts.
- Clearly elaborate a methodology to constantly monitor a project's development at the output level so that the evaluation of partial and final outputs is consistent with the monitoring process.
- Clearly elaborate a methodology to monitor outcomes and impacts at the community, regional, national or global level, as appropriate.
- Articulate milestones and develop measurable indicators of success for the evaluation.

#### As a result:

- We will consistently and regularly monitor progress towards our goals.
- We will be able to document community, regional, national or global outcomes and impacts, with qualitative and quantitative evidence.
- We will develop an evidence base of emerging threats and successful approaches to address them.



# Organizational Goal 2

## Strengthen regional offices



Photo courtesy of Pai Deetes/International Rivers.

**We will continue to invest in our regional offices directly and enhance support for their operations with a strong head office and support staff.**

### Why?

International Rivers has transformed as an organization. Our regionalization process located International Rivers' staff in several of the most important regions for river protection. In addition to our staff based in the United States, we now have staff in China, Brazil, India, South Africa, Thailand and Australia. This has led to significant impact in these regions and closer relationships with local movements. Having staff and regional presence within the countries where

we work has allowed us to bolster our reputation with stakeholders locally. But the move to regionalize has also required internal organizational change: Regional offices require funding and core support, and management and coordination relies greatly on the latest technology.

While our regional offices have proven to be strategic and efficient in securing vital wins for rivers and communities, to achieve their full potential, these nascent regional offices require ongoing, targeted investment to build programmatic and administrative capacity.

### To achieve this goal, we will:

- Undertake a needs assessment of each regional office, identifying priority short- and long-term needs.
- Increase funding for regional programs through restricted and core support funding.

- Ensure adequate staffing of regional offices and programs
- Ensure technological services function well, facilitating good teamwork within and across regions.
- Increase coordination and support staff to assist regional offices.

### As a result:

- Our staff in regional offices are better supported to implement their work locally, while also engaging in organization-wide priorities.
- Regional offices maximize their efficiency with physical and technological resources that enhance their work.
- Staff in regional offices contribute to regionally-specific outcomes as well as organization-wide outcomes.



# Organizational Goal 3

## Build and diversify our Board of Directors



Photo courtesy of Pai Deetes/International Rivers.

**We will expand our Board of Directors with a targeted recruitment and retention strategy, aiming to enhance capacities in our Executive Board and other governance entities.**

### Why?

The Board of Directors is critical to achieving International Rivers' goals. It provides oversight of the organization, promotes our mission, and ensures careful and prudent use of financial resources. The Board of Directors helps ensure that the organization has sufficient human and financial resources to serve our mission and purpose.

International Rivers has benefitted from an extraordinarily committed Board over our more than 30-year history. As we embark on our new strategic vision, we need to diversify the composition of its membership so that the Board encompasses the range of skills, capabilities and expertise required to meet the aspirations of the organization.

### To achieve this goal, our Board will:

- Diversify the composition of its membership to achieve a greater depth and breadth of skills and experience.
- Review and update as necessary International Rivers' Board governance framework to ensure ongoing accountability within our operations to our members, supporters, funders and partners.

### As a result:

- Our Board will be strong and purpose-built to perform its governance, oversight and fundraising functions.
- Our Board will be a dynamic and stimulating entity able to catalyze support for International Rivers, and provide direction for the Executive Director and the organization.
- Our Board will ensure International Rivers' financial stability by meeting our reserves policy, maintaining strong operating budgets and setting attainable forward targets.



# Organizational Goal 4

## Stabilize, diversify and grow our funding



Photo courtesy of Jorge Uzón.

### **International Rivers will diversify and grow our funding base, with a high percentage of unrestricted core support funding.**

#### **Why?**

International Rivers is a small but highly efficient organization. We make smart investments that result in substantial achievements and progress towards our mission. Our funding base relies largely on program-restricted foundation grants, which have helped us to build strong, resilient programs. Unrestricted core support funding is also crucial, as it enables us to respond nimbly to new and pressing developments. Building a diverse and sustainable funding base will enable

International Rivers to deliver on the goals laid out in this strategic plan.

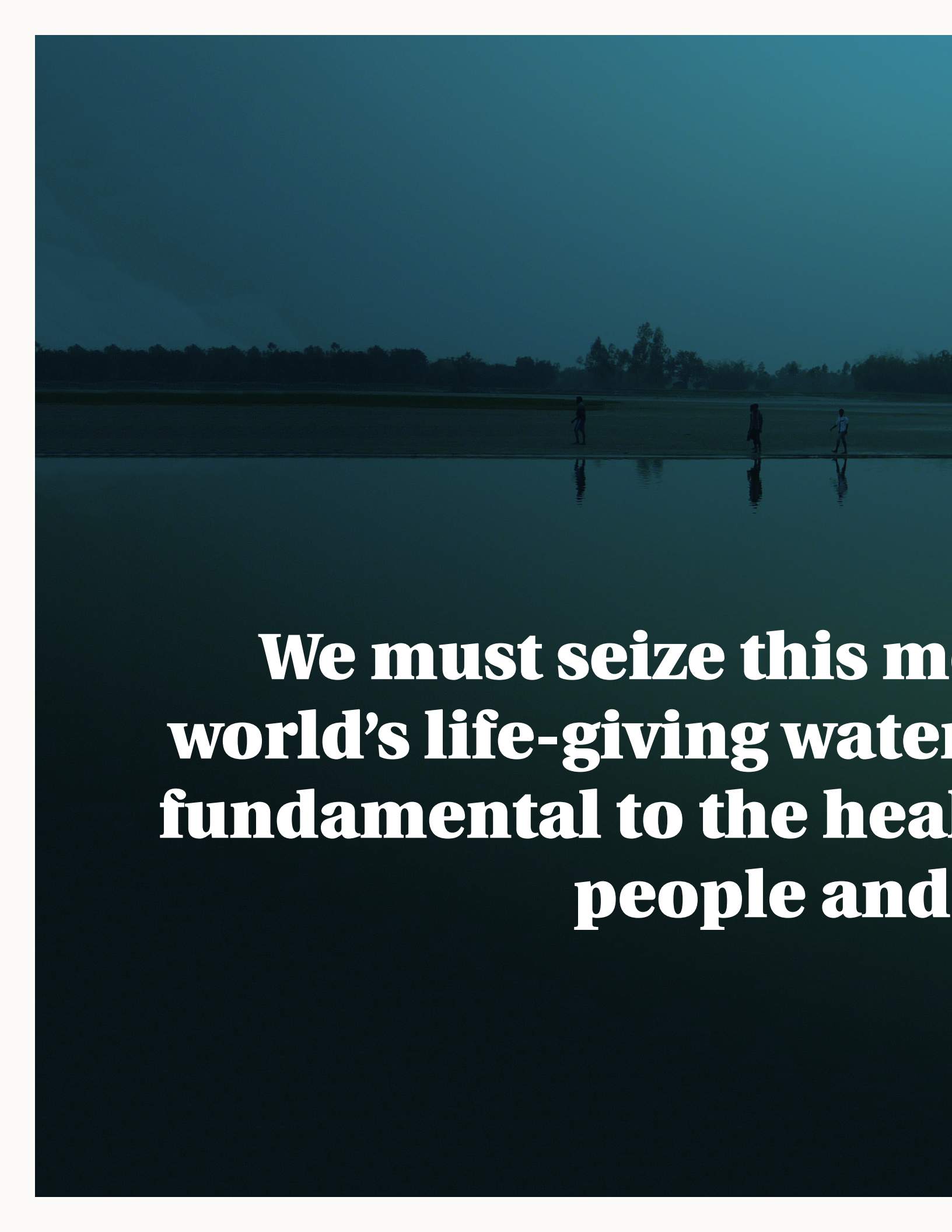
#### **To achieve this goal, we will:**

- Deepen and strengthen our relationships with existing institutional foundations, major donors and individual supporters.
- Grow our institutional fundraising, securing support for organizational priorities above and beyond regionally-restricted support.
- Grow our major donor fundraising program by designing and implementing robust prospecting, cultivation and stewardship strategies.
- Grow our individual membership fundraising program by designing and implementing online list acquisition, maintenance and growth strategies.

#### **As a result:**

- We will have strong relationships with current and new foundation partners, supported by multi-year, multi-region grants.
- We will have fully-developed fundraising and planned giving programs that attract and retain individual supporters and major donors.



A dark teal background with a silhouette of a landscape and three people walking on a path. The scene is reflected in a body of water in the foreground. The text is overlaid on the lower half of the image.

**We must seize this moment  
world's life-giving water  
fundamental to the health  
people and**





**oment to protect the  
rways, because they are  
lth and wellbeing of our  
this planet.**

TEESTA RIVER

The Teesta River at sunset  
in Bangladesh.

Photo courtesy of Samir Mehta/  
International Rivers.



## (Endnotes)

- 1 Capture Fisheries are notoriously under-reported due to much of the catch being used for household or subsistence purposes. This estimate is drawn from various sources and discussed in J Opperman, G Grill & J Hartmann, *The power of rivers: finding balance between energy and conservation in hydropower development*, The Nature Conservancy, Washington, D.C., 2015, p.12.
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- 15 Figures are sourced from Bloomberg Renewable Energy Report 2015, see <https://about.bnef.com/clean-energy-investment/> viewed on 30 May 2017. \$308.7 billion includes wind, solar and miscellaneous renewable projects such as geothermal, biogas, and waste to energy. Small hydro -1-50MW- (2015 USD\$3.5billion ) has been removed from the figures used by IR in assessing investment in renewable energy as there is too much variability in small hydropower design and production to accurately assess its positive/negative contribution at this scale. Small hydro projects should be assessed at river basin, sub-watershed and local river reaches scales to assess impacts on rivers, ecosystems and local communities.
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**International Rivers is a global  
organization with offices in Africa,  
Asia, and Latin America.**

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