

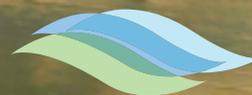
# Rivers for Recovery

Protecting Rivers and  
Rights as Essential for a  
Just and Green Recovery

Executive Summary



INTERNATIONAL  
**RIVERS**  
people • water • life



RIVERS WITHOUT  
BOUNDARIES



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Cover: *Sunrays over river.* Photo by Johannes Plenio (Pexels).

This report is a November 2020 co-publication of:



International Rivers is a global organization with regional offices in Asia, Africa and Latin America that works with river-dependent and dam-affected communities to ensure their voices are heard and their rights honored. The organization helps build well-resourced, active networks of civil society groups to protect rivers and defend the rights of communities that depend on them. It also undertakes independent, investigative research, generating robust data and evidence to inform policies and campaigns. International Rivers is independent and fearless in campaigning to expose and resist destructive projects, while also engaging with relevant stakeholders to realize 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.



RIVERS WITHOUT  
BOUNDARIES

The Rivers without Boundaries Coalition is a collaborative international network of organizations and experts dedicated to preserving the health of transboundary river basins in Eurasia through joint advocacy and promoting best practices in river management.

KECAMATAN JOMBANG, INDONESIA | *River flows through grass and mountains.* Photo by Rido Alwarno (Pexels).

An aerial photograph of a river with white water rapids, showing turbulent water and white foam. The image is in shades of blue and white, with the rapids on the right side and calmer water on the left.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting public health and economic crises are devastating populations around the globe, affecting marginalized and vulnerable groups most acutely. The massive, transformational shocks these crises have produced for our current economic, energy, and food systems require an equally transformational response, to address widespread economic collapse, hunger, unemployment, and environmental damage, centered in concerns for social justice and ecological integrity.

Rivers and freshwater ecosystems are vital to post-COVID global economic recovery. They underpin our natural systems, provide critical ecosystem services, and work as an economic safety net for the poor and vulnerable in many low- and middle-income countries. Yet, for generations, these arteries of the planet have been dammed, diverted, and polluted at a catastrophic cost to people and Earth's living systems. One in three freshwater species is now threatened with extinction.

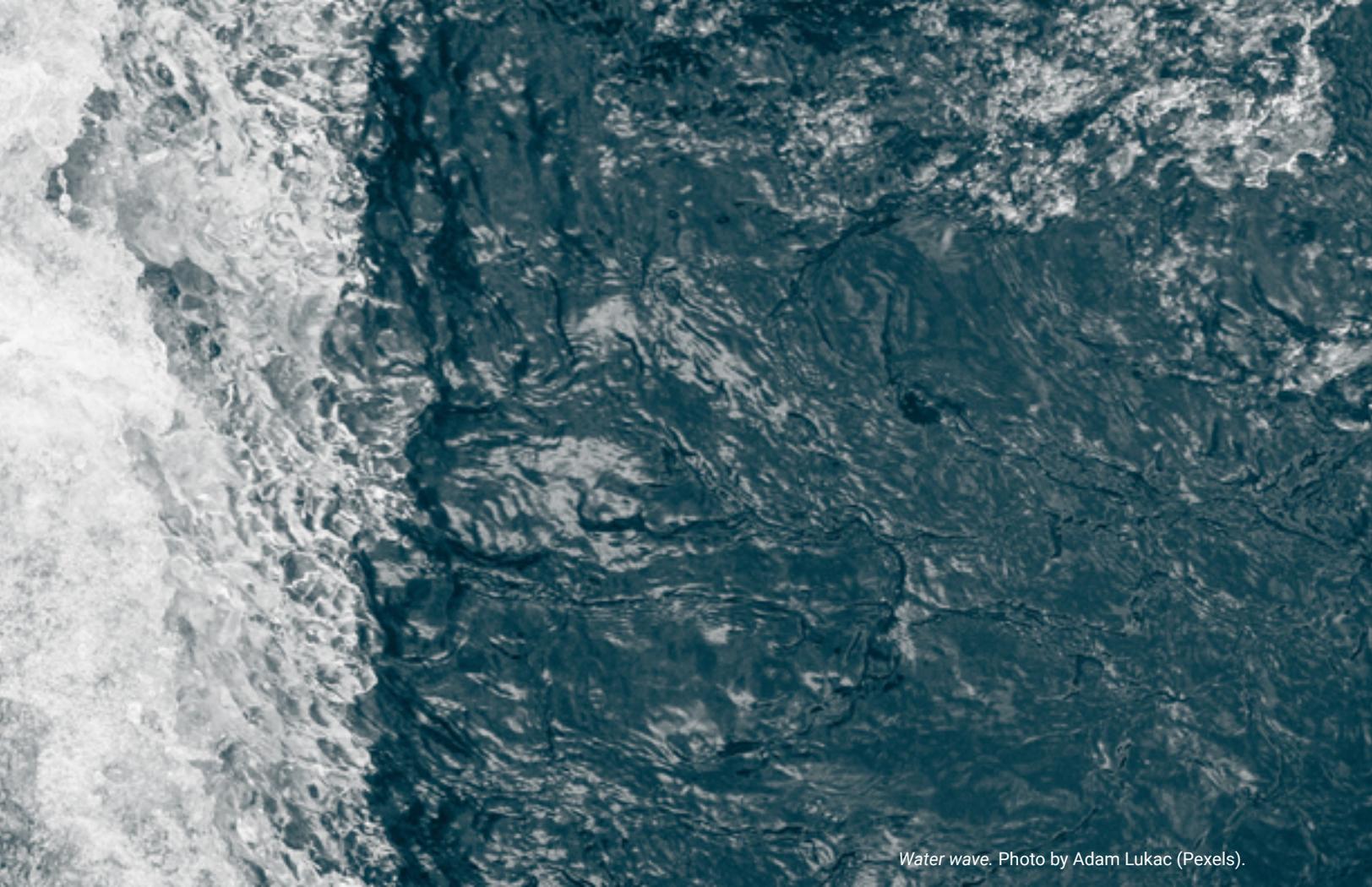
Today's tragic pandemic sheds new light on the fundamental inequities and challenges of our time, providing an opportunity to change course on the historic degradation of our rivers and freshwater systems. Our natural systems are integral to life on earth; for too long we have taken them for granted, and

exploited them to drive profit and "development" for the primary benefit of a privileged minority. Globally this trajectory has been unsustainable.

A new paradigm in river stewardship is critical, not only to safeguard the water sources that are indispensable to life and public health, but to help prevent countries bankrupted by COVID-19 from taking on calamitous new debt, as well as to speed a just energy transition and effectively confront the climate crisis. The current push to escalate dam-building in many low- and middle-income countries threatens such progress – a false energy solution that the hydropower industry is promoting under the guise of a "green" economic recovery.

This report explores these issues and calls for a recovery that is rooted in climate justice and protects our rivers as critical lifelines – supporting biodiversity, water supply, food production, Indigenous peoples, and diverse populations around the world – rather than damming and polluting them in pursuit of profit and short-sighted economic growth.

The report's findings reaffirm the conclusions of a wealth of scientific research and technical studies: that hydropower dams typically carry extremely high



*Water wave. Photo by Adam Lukac (Pexels).*

environmental and social impacts – they are a false solution and cannot deliver a green recovery. By comparison, investments in decentralized solar and wind technologies, as well as energy efficiency, are affordable and quickly deployable, and can deliver jobs cost-effectively in the economic recovery. In order to rebuild towards a better future, economic stimulus packages should invest in low-impact technologies and those that benefit vulnerable populations and ecosystems, prioritizing community rights and participation, rather than bail out destructive industries that are rapidly losing relevance and financing.

**Part 1** of this report explores the multiple crises we are now facing – the COVID-19 pandemic and the looming crises to our climate, water resources, and economic systems – and the ways in which these crises are interconnected.

**Part 2** provides insight into the state of our rivers and freshwater resources. This section outlines a case for why we need to rethink, and revalue, these precious resources – both to mitigate the impacts of climate change and water stress and, within the new context of economic recovery and stimulus, to rebuild healthy communities and a healthy planet. We examine

the current threats facing rivers and the very recent destructive impacts of dams brought online globally in 2019. Drawing on these lessons, we propose a ten-point plan outlining what can and should be happening to revalue and protect rivers and freshwater resources during the economic recovery.

**Part 3**, through a series of case studies, further explores the different pathways to COVID-19 response and economic recovery around the globe. This section provides insights into both the opportunities and the challenges ahead. We use a simple traffic light system to explore the different scenarios, with red representing a pre-pandemic “business as usual” approach, orange highlighting risks alongside an opportunity to change course, and green where we see the possibility of a more hopeful path pointing towards a new future for valuing rivers.

**Part 4**, the final section of the report, provides detailed recommendations for government, financiers, and international institutions to take critical action towards a recovery that is just and sustainable for rivers and water sources, people, and our planet.

We call for a **green economic recovery** that includes:

- ✓ **A moratorium on new hydropower dams as an essential step towards a sustainable and just economic recovery.\*** This should be accompanied by a comprehensive review of energy systems and pipeline projects to prioritize protecting freshwater ecosystems and the community livelihoods and economies that depend on them.
- ✓ **A rapid upscale of investment into non-hydropower renewables and storage, together with policies to facilitate socially and environmentally responsible investment.** Investment should kickstart renewable energy projects, roll out centralized and distributed connectivity, build jobs, and deliver low-cost and low-impact electrification to those experiencing energy poverty. Governments can use incentives to foster upstream value chain investment in local renewable energy manufacturing and assembly.
- ✓ **Upgrades to existing hydropower projects to increase efficiency instead of building new dams.** This can include retrofitting turbines, improved pumped storage, and grid-integration with wind, solar, and other energy innovations. Upgrades should be accompanied by concrete steps to reduce damage to freshwater ecosystems and local livelihoods through robust mitigation and compensation. Dam removal and river restoration should be undertaken when the adverse social and environmental impacts of existing dams cannot be effectively mitigated.
- ✓ **Investment in green infrastructure that protects and restores freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity, alongside laws governing freshwater protection.** This includes ensuring priority to ecosystem services and job opportunities for local communities, and facilitating dialogues between government, private sector, and Indigenous and community water users. Green infrastructure and renewable energy investments must be in line with international human rights standards and environmental safeguards and respect the right of Indigenous peoples and other traditional communities to Free, Prior, and Informed Consultation and Consent.
- ✓ **New energy development plans** that emphasize investment in energy conservation and efficiency, participatory demand-side modelling, and options for smart, distributed energy and mini-grids located close to energy sources and end users, with a focus on community grids and expanded energy access. Governments should halt expensive and long-timeline hydropower projects and then review and update energy plans and reassess options for electrification, ensuring transparency and public participation at all stages of planning and implementation.

- ✓ **Safeguards for protected areas in stimulus and recovery plans.** This includes adopting policies supporting “no go” zones for environmentally destructive investments in protected areas, endangered and vulnerable species habitat, free-flowing rivers, and the territories of Indigenous people and other traditional communities. Identify and halt destructive uses and development pressures on protected areas. Instead of backtracking on existing legislation, governments should strengthen policies to protect rivers, biodiversity and people’s rights.

Conversely, we argue that a **false path to economic recovery** includes:

- ✗ **Expanding crippling debt** for countries already facing economic crises due to COVID-19 and massive debt burdens resulting from shortsighted decisions, such as investing in costly, unprofitable large hydropower projects rather than exploring cost-effective, sustainable, and socially-just pathways for economic recovery.
- ✗ **“Green financing” that prioritizes “green-washed” solutions** including environmentally-destructive hydropower projects that divert scarce funds away from more sustainable solutions, such as decentralized community energy projects and household rooftop solar.
- ✗ **Large centralized grids designed around destructive projects**, such as megadams and fossil fuels. This would lock out transformative capacity and job opportunities for more nimble and distributed energy systems, running counter to the Sustainable Development Goal of sustainable energy access for all (SDG 7).
- ✗ **Ongoing abuse of our freshwater resources** through policies and practices that treat freshwater ecosystems as inexhaustible resources to be exploited for short-term economic growth, and repositories for wasteful patterns of production and consumption.
- ✗ **Weakening of environmental and social safeguards and regulations** to allow the accelerated implementation of infrastructure in the absence of proper environmental review or comprehensive public participation and without respecting the rights of Indigenous peoples and other traditional communities with regard to their territories, self-determination and free, prior and informed consent (FPIC).

\*This excludes mini (typically less than 500 Kv) and micro-hydro (less than 100Kv) supported by local communities, projects equipping existing canals, reservoirs and dams with generators, and closed-loop pumped hydro, which does not use natural water bodies as reservoirs.