



Native Women's  
Association of Canada

L'Association des  
femmes autochtones  
du Canada

# PRE-ENGAGEMENT SURVEY WITH THE CANADA WATER AGENCY

## WHAT WE HEARD REPORT

MARCH 28, 2025



Environment and  
Climate Change Canada

Environnement et  
Changement climatique Canada

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# DEFINITIONS

**Below are terms used throughout the report:**

**WG2SGD+ Peoples:** Women, girls, Two Spirit, and Gender Diverse + Peoples.

**Knowledge Keepers:** trusted individuals—often Elders—who carry and share important cultural, spiritual, and land-based knowledge passed down through generations. They guide communities through teachings, stories, ceremonies, and traditional practices. In many Nations, women, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse people hold special roles as Knowledge Keepers, especially in areas related to water.

**Water Governance:** Water governance refers to how decisions about water are made and who is involved in making them. From an Indigenous perspective, it means respecting water as a living being and upholding responsibilities to care for it. This includes leadership from Indigenous communities, especially WG2SGD+ people, based on traditional laws, knowledge, and relationships with water.



# RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

**The goal of this survey was to gather the perspectives of Indigenous Women, Girls, Two-Spirit, and Gender-diverse (WG2SGD+) People on the most meaningful way the Canada Water Agency can engage with Indigenous communities and organizations during the review of the *Canada Water Act*.**

The Canada Water Agency (CWA) is a federal organization that was established in December 2022 to improve freshwater management across Turtle Island and Inuit Nunangat. The purpose of the agency is to protect and restore freshwater resources while also ensuring better collaboration between different levels of government, Indigenous communities, and other partners in such efforts.

A major task the CWA is undertaking is the review and amendment to the *Canada Water Act*, which has not changed in nearly 50 years. The Act is meant to protect and manage Canada's freshwater, but it fails to recognize Indigenous rights and governance over water, despite legal commitments like Section 35 of the Constitution, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and court rulings that affirm Indigenous jurisdiction.



# RESEARCH METHODS

**This report is based on a nation-wide online survey completed Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, transgender and gender-diverse (WG2SGD+) people.**

The questionnaire was designed by NWAC, with input and advice from Environics Research. NWAC programmed the questionnaire on a survey platform and distributed an open survey link. The survey was distributed via social media and email in March 2025 and with the organization's internal and external networks, for instance with NWAC's Provincial Territorial Member Associations (PTMAs). NWAC conducted data cleaning to remove invalid and fraudulent responses and passed the datafile to Environics for analysis and reporting.

**Interpreting the results:** No adjustments were made to the data and drawn from a convenience sample, meaning those who participated in the survey were drawn from a conveniently available group of individuals. Because it is not a probability sample (respondents were not randomly selected, nor did all individuals in the desired communities have an equal chance of being selected into the sample), the sample cannot be considered statistically representative of all Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse people. The results of the survey provide valuable insight into the lived experience of respondents, but the data should be interpreted within the limits of the survey design. Those who participated highlighted important perspectives on their preferences for engagement which will inform future community-led initiatives.

**About this report:** Unless otherwise noted, results for all questions are based on the total number of people who completed the survey. Percentages may not always add up to exactly 100% because of rounding. Very small values (under 2%) are not labelled.



# SUMMARY

# KEY FINDINGS

**Gender-inclusive co-governance must be the foundation of all water decision-making moving forward.** The feedback received through this survey makes it clear that water governance must include Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples—particularly Elders and Knowledge Keepers—as equal partners in shaping decisions that impact water and community well-being. As the Canada Water Act is amended, and as the Canada Water Agency (CWA) continues to take on federal water decision-making, it is essential that gender-inclusive co-governance becomes the standard. Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples must not only be included, but able to share equal authority and responsibility as other contributing parties in all water-related decisions. To move toward this, the CWA must co-develop gender-inclusive and culturally grounded engagement frameworks in full collaboration with those being engaged. Engagement formats, methods, and timelines must reflect the specific realities of Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples and actively remove barriers to their participation.

Throughout this report, participants called for meaningful engagement, active listening, and effective follow-through—principles that are only possible when engagement is built through the lens of gender-inclusive co-governance. This means recognizing that Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples bring unique insight and leadership to the table, and any decision-making process that excludes them is incomplete. Beyond the amendment of the Canada Water Act, going forward, every aspect of water decision-making must be built on the foundation of gender-inclusive co-governance with Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples. Without this commitment, the CWA will not reflect the needs and realities of those across Turtle Island and Inuit Nunangat.



# KEY FINDINGS

## **Engagement must be culturally grounded, community-led, and spiritually respectful.**

Our women have traditionally led decision making related to water, because of their deep and sacred connection to it as life givers and water carriers. Respondents shared that to meaningfully engage with Indigenous WG2SGD+ peoples, the process must respect their cultures and spiritual practices, and be led by the communities themselves. They emphasized the importance of Indigenous rights, laws, and worldviews guiding the engagement process. Respondents also felt that it is important to make space for Indigenous WG2SGD+ peoples to meaningfully, and actively participate; have their participation supported, such as through funding, travel support, and accessible engagement formats; and ensure their feedback is taken seriously.

Supports for participation include travel assistance, childcare, honouraria, virtual and hybrid engagements, and culturally safe spaces that incorporate Indigenous languages, ceremony, and trauma-informed practices. Meaningful participation means being involved from the outset, co-developing engagement processes, and contributing through cultural and community-based ways of knowing. Respondents also emphasized that their feedback should lead to tangible actions and policy outcomes and there should be clear demonstration of the feedback in use. This also means transparency about how input is used, regular follow-up, and clear evidence that their voices are shaping decisions.





# KEY FINDINGS

**Hybrid, Indigenous-led, and community-based formats are most preferred.** When asked how Indigenous WG2SGD+ people prefer to be engaged, respondents preferred a hybrid approach (25%) that combines in-person and online options to make participation more accessible.

Accessible and hybrid spaces are crucial methods, because of the unique conditions and socio-economic-environmental realities of Indigenous WG2SGD+ people. For instance, many communities are remote or have limited transportation access. Some rely on ice roads which can be unreliable, especially amidst a changing climate and seasons. Our Elders and some community members may have mobility needs, while others may not have the means to travel to engagement locations. Many women have caretaking responsibilities which must be attended to, or jobs which have inflexible hours. For these reasons, there is a massive advantage to virtual engagements, however, the challenging reality is that many communities do not have reliable internet. The feedback of this survey indicates a significant preference and importance of in-person gatherings, however, in addition to such, the inclusion of hybrid options is essential to overcome engagement barriers. The CWA must ask communities what they need and accustom to the unique and varying conditions of different Indigenous communities – one size does not fit all.

Many felt that it is important for Indigenous organizations like NWAC to lead engagement (17%), and others preferred having community-based discussions in their own territories (16%). In-person gatherings (15%) are still important, as are online sessions (7%), surveys (7%), or written submissions (3%). It was clear that there is no one-size-fits-all approach and that engagement should include different ways to participate and be designed around what works best for each community.



# KEY FINDINGS

**Indigenous organizations are seen as key facilitators and advocates for WG2SGD+ engagement.** There is strong support for Indigenous organizations to support engagement efforts. A majority of respondent believe these organizations should help communities navigate federal policies during engagement processes (76%). This means helping communities understand, interpret, and respond to complex government procedures, regulations, and decision-making processes. Many also see Indigenous organizations playing a critical role in ensuring accountability from the CWA (72%).

Indigenous WG2SGD+ peoples emphasized Indigenous organizations' importance in creating culturally safe and inclusive spaces (67%), developing leadership opportunities (62%), and advocating for WG2SGD+ engagement (59%). Indigenous organizations also play a role in conducting gender-specific policy research and recommendations on water policy and governance (48%). This means looking at how different policies impact people based on their gender identity and lived experience, and identifying gaps, barriers, or inequities that may not be visible through a gender-neutral lens

These roles reflect a broader trust in Indigenous-led organizations to steward processes with integrity and deep cultural relevance.

This also indicates the importance of the Canada Water Agency establishing long-term relationships with Indigenous organizations, including NWAC as a gender-inclusive advocacy outlet, to ensure all Indigenous WG2SGD+ peoples are engaged suitably and respectfully.



# KEY FINDINGS CONT.

**Indigenous governments, Women Elders and Knowledge Keepers must hold key leadership and decision-making roles.** Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that Indigenous governments, Women Elders and Knowledge Keepers should play central roles in when it comes to meaningful engagement with CWA. Most believe Indigenous governments should be directly involved in holding the CWA accountable (81%) and in ensuring decisions reflect Indigenous laws and governance systems (78%). It is important that the CWA ensures such opportunities are continually presented to Indigenous governments. Additionally, there was strong support for Indigenous governments to develop gender-specific policies and create community-driven engagement opportunities (69%), and to ensure WG2SGD+ representation in leadership positions (64%).

Elders and Knowledge Keepers were also seen as essential, with advisory and decision-making roles supported by most respondents (78% each), and additional emphasis placed mentorship (73%), ceremonial leadership (71%), Indigenous-led accountability (68%), and decision-making related to CWA engagement frameworks (64%). Elders having advisory and decision-making roles means CWA would formally include Elders and Knowledge Keepers as advisors in planning and decision-making, engaging them early, asking for their time and knowledge, and relying heavily on their perspectives throughout engagement design, facilitation, and follow-up.

For Indigenous communities, respecting and uplifting our Elders in leadership positions is a core principle. It is our women Elders who hold invaluable knowledge and awareness of water, because of their inherent connection to it as a life-giving force. Meaningfully including them in decision-making is paramount. Not only do they have the wisdom just mentioned, but they have a unique lived experience of intersectional realities. Their awareness and knowledge, combined with the understanding of gender conditions, is essential to establishing sufficient decision-making that meet the needs of all.



# KEY FINDINGS CONT.

**Authentic, long-term and inclusive engagement processes are essential to success.** Effective engagement must extend beyond one-off consultations and prioritize long-term, relationship-based approaches. The majority of respondents emphasized the importance of community-based visits (80%), land-based gatherings (79%), and Elder advisory councils (79%) as core practices and ways to build meaningful and sincere engagements. A majority of respondents supported long-term relationship-building (79%), meaning sustained, trust-based partnerships that go beyond one-time consultations. This includes ongoing engagement, legally binding agreements, the creation of permanent Indigenous advisory bodies, and decision-making that respect Indigenous laws. Respondents noted upholding Free, Prior and Informed (FPIC) not just once, but as a continuous practice.

Reducing barriers to participation (78%) was also strongly supported, which includes eliminating obstacles that prevent people from attending engagements by providing compensation, multiple methods of providing input, meals, travel support, and family-friendly environments. There was also strong support for integrating Indigenous knowledge and languages into engagements (76%), and for enabling Indigenous-led processes (73%), meaning that Indigenous communities, particularly WG2SGD+ peoples, should be the ones designing, guiding, and facilitating engagement activities. Respondents called for engagement processes rooted in Indigenous worldviews, led by those with deep cultural knowledge.

Not only should this mean long-term relationships with transparent and open communication between Indigenous communities and the CWA, but it should also mean that there are sufficient long-term agreements made between the CWA and Indigenous organizations like NWAC to support such engagements without interruption.



# SURVEY RESULTS

# SECTION 1

# **ENGAGEMENT PREFERENCES**

Understanding how Indigenous WG2SGD+ want to engage with Canada Water Agency.

# Engagement | **Engaging with Indigenous WG2SGD+**

The following slides present recommendations directly from Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples. Five themes emerged from ideas respondents shared about engaging with Indigenous WG2SGD+. Respondents call for culturally grounded, spiritually respectful, and community-led engagement that emphasizes the leadership and rights of Indigenous WG2SGD+, builds lasting trust through action, and ensures equitable access to resources and decision-making in water governance.

**Q. 1**    *How should the Canada Water Agency engage with Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse people to ensure your knowledge, rights, and leadership in water governance are truly respected—not just acknowledged? [Open Ended]*

Leadership & Rights of Indigenous WG2SGD+	Culturally Safe and Community-Rooted Engagement	Relationship and Trust-Building Through Action	Spiritual and Ethical Responsibility to Water	Resources, Equity, and Participant Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Clear responses about placing Indigenous WG2SGD+ in positions of decision-making, policy influence, or leadership.</li><li>• Emphasizes self-determination, representation, and legal authority.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Respondents mention the importance of including ceremony, Indigenous languages and engagements led by Indigenous WG2SGD+.</li><li>• Engagement that honours Indigenous ways of knowing and relating.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Build long-term relationships by listening deeply, honouring voices and acting on feedback.</li><li>• Emphasis on being consistent, reciprocal, and transparent.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Acknowledging the value and meaning of water in Indigenous culture.</li><li>• Responses are grounded in an Indigenous worldview of treating the water as a relative and recommend engagements use this view too.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Clean drinking water for all, inclusion of remote voices, funding support, and other resources that enable full participation in engagements.</li><li>• Making space by removing colonial or financial barriers.</li></ul>



## Engagement | **Leadership & Rights of Indigenous WG2SGD+**

Respondents emphasized the importance of placing Indigenous WG2SGD+ people in positions of leadership, policy influence, and decision-making related to water governance. This theme highlights the importance of self-determination, legal authority, and representation, ensuring that WG2SGD+ voices are not only heard but empowered to shape outcomes.

“

Recognize that we as Indigenous people are the first peoples of this land and as such are stewards of the land and water. Our women have a specific traditional role with water and we know and honour our relationship with water. **Water is Sacred. Water is Life.**

“

Government should educate itself in knowing the necessity of bringing these women leaders together. We are in Canada in urban, rural and remote communities. **This is our walk. We are advocates for our water and work hard to educate others, while continually emphasizing the safety & protection of water.** We are essential participants and leaders in helping Government to form its laws and regulations regarding water and the impact of industry on water.

“

The Canada Water Agency must actively listen to Indigenous water warriors and take real action to protect water, rather than engaging in performative consultations. **Water is not just a resource that lasts forever—it is living, sacred, and must be treated with the respect it deserves.** Protecting water should be the top priority, not just another discussion point for reports and studies.

“

Prioritize Indigenous W2SLGBTQ+ Leadership: Recognize their roles as water protectors by ensuring their voices lead governance processes, funding, and decision-making.





## Engagement | **Culturally Safe and Community-Rooted Engagement**

This theme highlights the need for engagement processes that are grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing, including ceremony, traditional languages, and leadership by Indigenous WG2SGD+. Respondents called for approaches that are culturally respectful, trauma-informed, and designed in partnership with communities to ensure meaningful and authentic engagement.



**Partner with community knowledge keepers to host cultural practices in which teachings are shared.** This is a barrier for individuals who would have to pay to rent a space in which to do so.



They need to commit to listen - that means engagement sessions all over and making those sessions accessible. There needs to be Indigenous Leadership involved in the sessions, such as Elders to do the sessions in a good way. **We do things by sitting in Circle and letting everyone have a voice.** We also do ceremony to guide the decisions that are made. We also have to start looking at creating **Matriarch Councils** that can be consulted on these matters to ensure that decisions are not all political in focus.



**Come directly to the community,** have an Elder to open, hire drummers, host a luncheon or dinner, and create focus groups with facilitators. Give out free swag with vendors around the venue. Deliver a PowerPoint presentation and/ or host a canoe event in summertime for Indigenous women and girls. Anything with horses/ therapy animals would be valuable and offer a great experience for the youth. Being in the community and learning their language is a great way engage with trust, with humour and respect. Work with the Elders to offer something to the community.



In our communities and when possible, on the land. **Engagement needs to be led by matriarchs and trauma informed.**



## Engagement | **Relationship and Trust-Building Through Action**

Trust is built over time through reciprocal, transparent, and consistent engagement. Long-term relationship-building, not one-time consultations, should be the process. Indigenous WG2SGD+ highlighted the need for the CWA to listen with intention, respond meaningfully to feedback, and show sustained commitment beyond individual engagements.

Hold people accountable by engaging in daily, weekly, or monthly environmental activities. Check on the upkeep of our waters systems, the habitat, and encourage **healthy relationships with the earth.**

The CWA must move beyond token engagement and take concrete actions that respect and uphold Indigenous leadership in water governance. This means actively listening to and working alongside **Elders, Matriarchs, Hereditary Chiefs, Clan Leaders, and youth** to ensure their knowledge and authority guide decision-making. Commitments must include protecting water sources, educating future generations, and fostering healthy relationships with water based on Indigenous laws and worldviews. **Accountability requires greater transparency, inclusivity, and shared decision-making, ensuring Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse people have a real seat at the table—not just an invitation to observe.**

The CWA should first meet the Indigenous Peoples of Canada at the grass roots level to seek their input and participation on how to move forward. Specific questions to each community on what actions, what commitments, time frame and who needs to be responsible. **It should be made clear that the responsibility lies in a collaborative, cooperative relationship and that one group cannot do what is needed on their own.**

**My hope is that the agency hires Indigenous women and Two Spirit people and actually listens and implements what they recommend.** Too often, federal and provincial agencies do this sort of information gathering but then ignores and [suppresses] the Indigenous knowledge keepers' voices.



## Engagement | **Spiritual and Ethical Responsibility to Water**

Water was repeatedly described as sacred and living, with many respondents emphasizing its spiritual meaning in Indigenous cultures. This theme reflects a recommendation for the CWA to honour water as a relative, and to approach water governance through a lens that aligns with Indigenous teachings and law.



Invite them to the table to talk about the **Spirit of water**.



To truly uphold this responsibility, **a traditional Indigenous water protector must be part of all decision-making processes, not just as an advisor but as a leader**. Their voice must be heard in a way that reflects our teachings, speaking in a language that carries the depth of our relationship with water—one that decision-makers can understand, not just acknowledge.



The decisions should be up to the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. **They have a deep connection to the water and the land that goes back since time immemorial. They are the true stewards of the lands that understand the balance of the web that is life for all creatures on Turtle Island.** The government must stop using the resources of the land as tools for profit. As part of reconciliation, it is up to the government to trust the traditional land keepers for upcoming decisions so the sacred water that is life, can continue to flow clean and healthy and sustain all creatures for generations into the future.



These are our (human) resources by life right. **We need more protection and caring for our children and future.** Water and land and Mother Earth are our future.



## Engagement | **Resources, Equity, and Participant Support**

Meaningful engagement requires removing barriers and providing tangible supports, such as funding, travel assistance, childcare, and safe, inclusive environments. Respondents stressed that equity must be built into engagement design, ensuring that all WG2SGD+ Peoples, including those in remote communities, can fully participate and lead.



By supporting **capacity building initiatives** that empower Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse people.



**Funding for Indigenous women's groups to conduct research** in communities and participate in sessions with First Nation and federal government



Have **regional technical and cultural committees representing each Treaty and Metis area. Provide resources for women to meet** and tell the impacts of being water carriers and protectors. Create a coordinator position in each province and territory to coordinate the meetings and provide reports back.



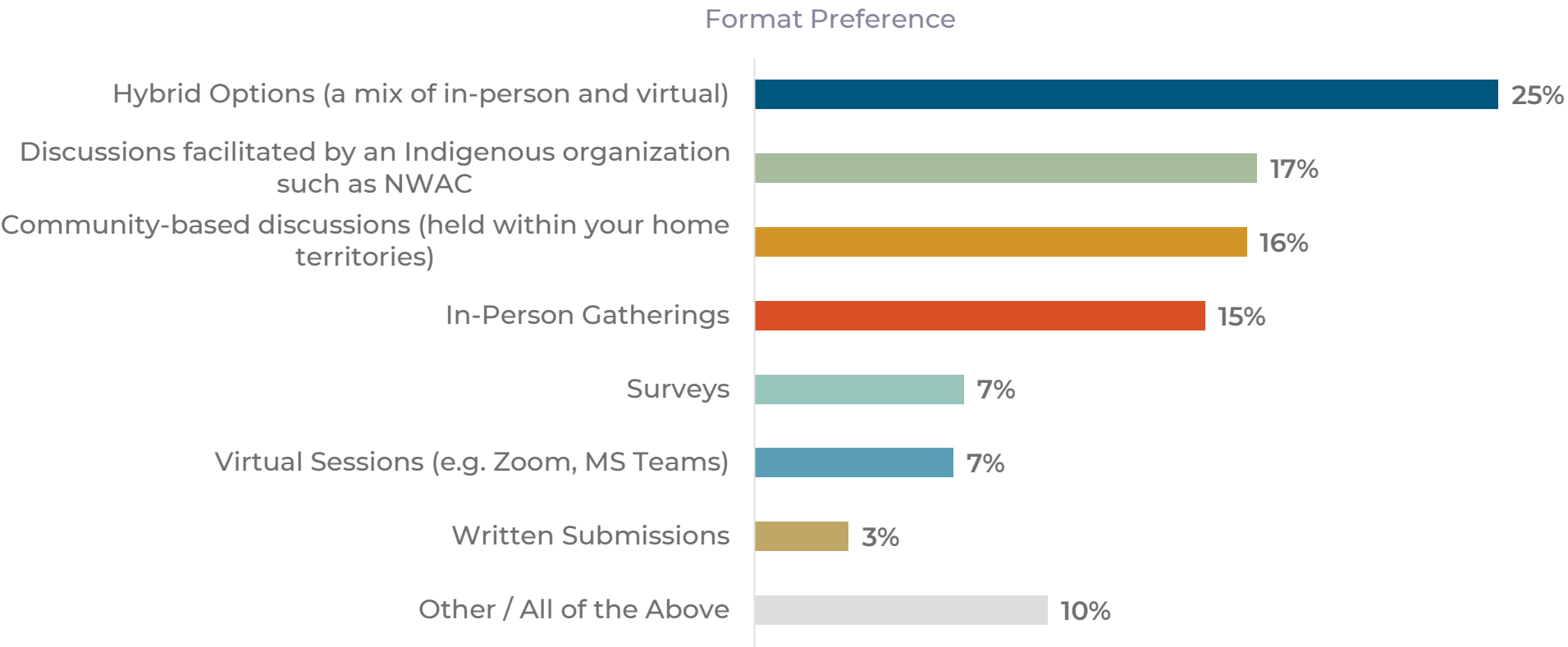
Core funding for **Indigenous-Led Water Guardian Programs**: Funding must be long-term and flexible, supporting the self-determined stewardship of water **by Indigenous women leaders.**



# Engagement | **Format preference**

While preferences vary, hybrid engagement approaches (25%) are most favoured, followed by facilitation by Indigenous organizations like NWAC (17%) and community-based discussions on home territories (16%). In-person gatherings (15%) remain important, with some preference shown for virtual sessions (7%), surveys (7%), and written submissions (3%). Respondents also advocate for all formats to promote an inclusive and accessible approach.

**Q. 2**    *How would you prefer to be engaged on water-related issues?*



# Engagement

## Format preference

Seeing that the most preferred option is hybrid, it is important for us to comment that this is not typically an option used by governmental departments. Typically, governmental engagements utilize either in-person or virtual methods but will not blend those options together, such as live-streaming an in-person engagement via zoom to allow accessibility. The CWA must incorporate hybrid methods into all engagements, as it is a simple way to ensure accessibility, participation, and accountability to inclusive co-governance models.

Few people selected “written submissions” as a preferred engagement format. This is likely because it is seen as a check-box method used with both Indigenous communities and organizations. There are a number of problems that have come about from this particular engagement method, including: the distribution of discussion papers or summaries of work to organizations and communities with very short timeframes to provide feedback, and having little to no accountability protocols in place to implement that feedback. It is also a very segregated method of engagement and prevents healthy dialogue between Indigenous communities and decision-making bodies. For Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples oral storytelling is a sacred and central form of communication, used to share knowledge, build relationships, and pass on teachings. Engagement methods that rely solely on written feedback disregard these traditions and may exclude or limit participation. The CWA should consider replacing some attempts to engage by this format with in-person or hybrid discussions.

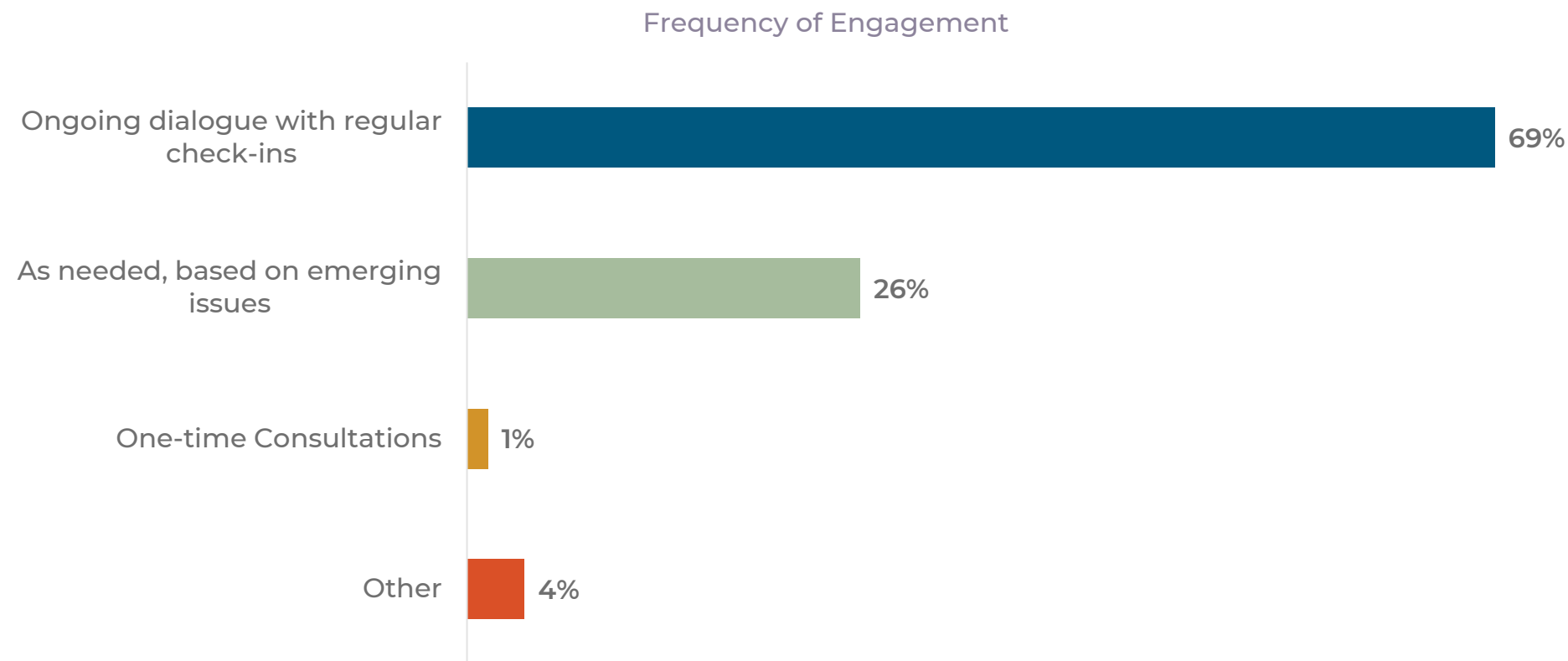
It is also important to note that Indigenous WG2SGD+ also advocate for an approach where all of the methods are incorporated into the engagement, again reflecting a need for providing multiple ways for community members to participate and have their voices heard.



# Engagement | **Frequency of engagement**

Most participants (69%) emphasized the importance of ongoing dialogue with regular check-ins, while others expressed a preference for engagement as issues emerge (26%), and a few highlighted other approaches, including one-time consultations (1%).

**Q. 2**    *How would you prefer to be engaged on water-related issues?*



## Engagement

### Frequency of engagement

Only one percent selected “one-time consultation” and for many years, this was the standard practice of governmental bodies. Over the years, the federal government has improved its engagement efforts, however, there remains to be a universal standard of engagement that ensures ongoing dialogue with regular check-ins for Indigenous peoples and communities, particularly with a gender-inclusive framework that equally involves Indigenous WG2SGD+ people. The CWA must establish a framework that requires meaningful engagements with Indigenous WG2SGD+ peoples on a regular basis, likely in a manner that is set in advance to ensure participation; and where regular check-ins are guaranteed to ensure Indigenous WG2SGD+ peoples are informed on CWA progress, and opening space for feedback and guidance.

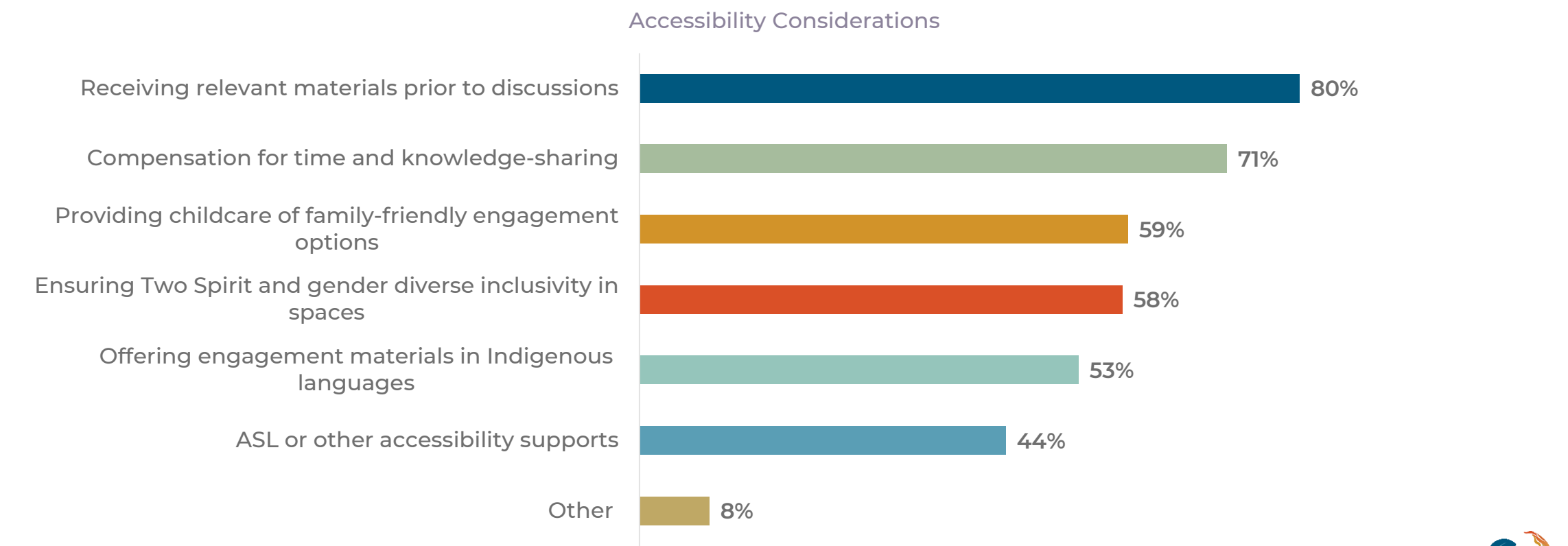




# Engagement | **Accessibility considerations**

Inclusive and culturally respectful engagement includes receiving materials in advance to support preparation (80%), fair compensation for time and knowledge-sharing (71%), family-friendly supports (59%), and accessible spaces that affirm gender diversity (58%), offer Indigenous language options (53%), and provide other accessibility supports (44%).

**Q. 2**    *How would you prefer to be engaged on water-related issues? Select all that apply.*



# Engagement

## **Accessibility considerations**

Each of these considerations received positive reception, and they all offer clear direction for how the CWA should be engaging with Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples in a good way. We recommend that the CWA incorporates all of these considerations into their engagement frameworks when working with Indigenous WG2SGD+ peoples.

For many Indigenous women, accessibility is not just about location—it includes layered barriers that must be considered to ensure meaningful participation. For example, technical limitations such as unreliable internet or lack of devices in rural and remote communities can prevent women from accessing virtual engagements. Physical accessibility must also be prioritized, especially for Elders or women living with disabilities, whose mobility needs are often overlooked in mainstream event planning.

Childcare responsibilities are another major barrier, as Indigenous women are often primary caregivers within their families and communities. Engagement sessions must offer flexible scheduling or provide onsite or supported childcare options to allow mothers and caregivers to participate. Transportation is a consistent challenge, particularly for women living in remote or under-resourced areas who may not have access to safe or affordable travel options to attend in-person sessions.

Engagement must be designed with these realities in mind to ensure Indigenous women are not left out due to systemic or logistical barriers. To ensure that the CWA conducts these efforts in an appropriate manner, we recommend they partner with Indigenous organizations like NWAC to help facilitate engagements that are culturally safe, community-informed, and fully tailored to the lived experiences of those being engaged.



# SECTION 2

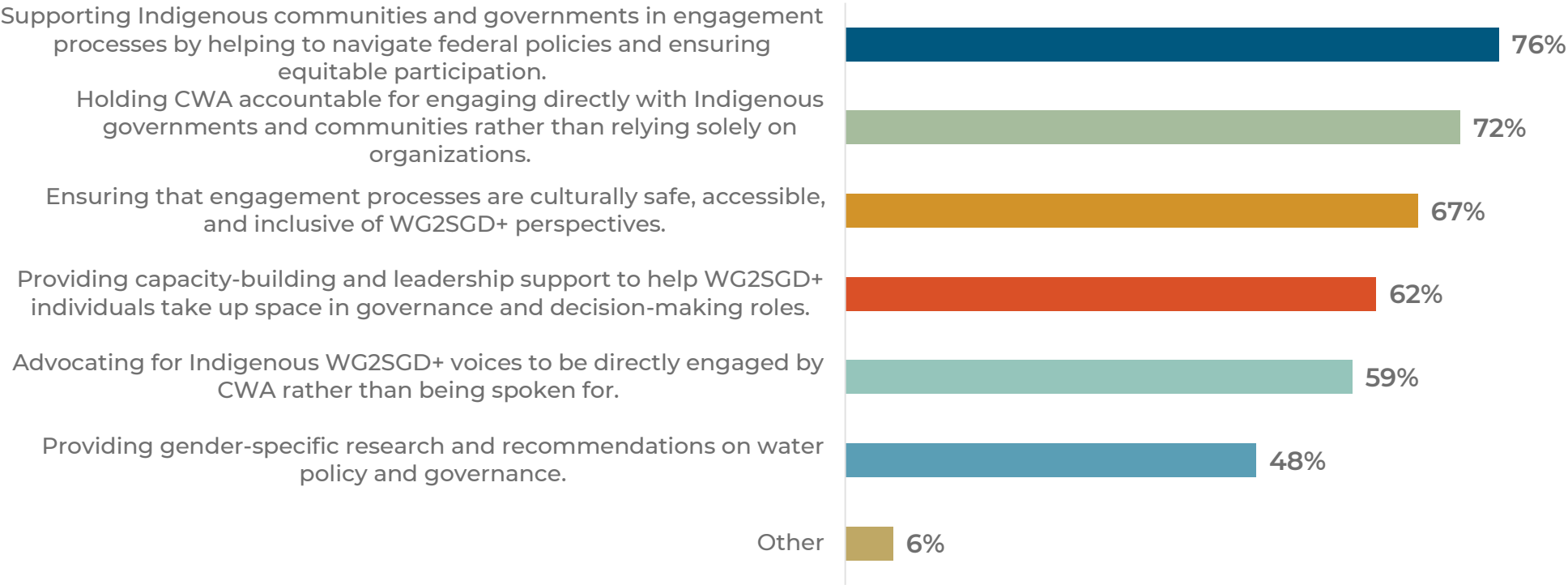
## **ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES**

Understanding the roles of various Indigenous demographics during engagement with Canada Water Agency.

# Roles and responsibilities | **Indigenous organizations**

Respondents see Indigenous organizations like NWAC playing a key role in supporting communities to navigate federal policies during engagements (76%), ensuring accountability from CWA (72%), and creating culturally safe, inclusive spaces for WG2SGD+ voices (67%). Leadership development (62%), advocacy for WG2SGD+ engagement (59%), and gender-specific policy research (48%) are also identified as essential roles.

**Q. 3** *What role should Indigenous organizations, like NWAC, play in ensuring Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse (WG2SGD+) people are meaningfully engaged by the Canada Water Agency (CWA)?*



## Roles and responsibilities **Indigenous organizations**

The positive response to such potential roles of organizations, like NWAC, during future engagements indicates how crucial it is that the CWA respects the model of co-governance and all the factors that come into play under such a mandate. Co-governance can only be truly established if both parties are given equal opportunity and capacity to contribute. Under co-governance with Indigenous WG2SGD+ peoples, this means the knowledge, culture, protocols, and needs of Indigenous WG2SGD+ people are not only considered but prioritized to ensure their equal involvement.

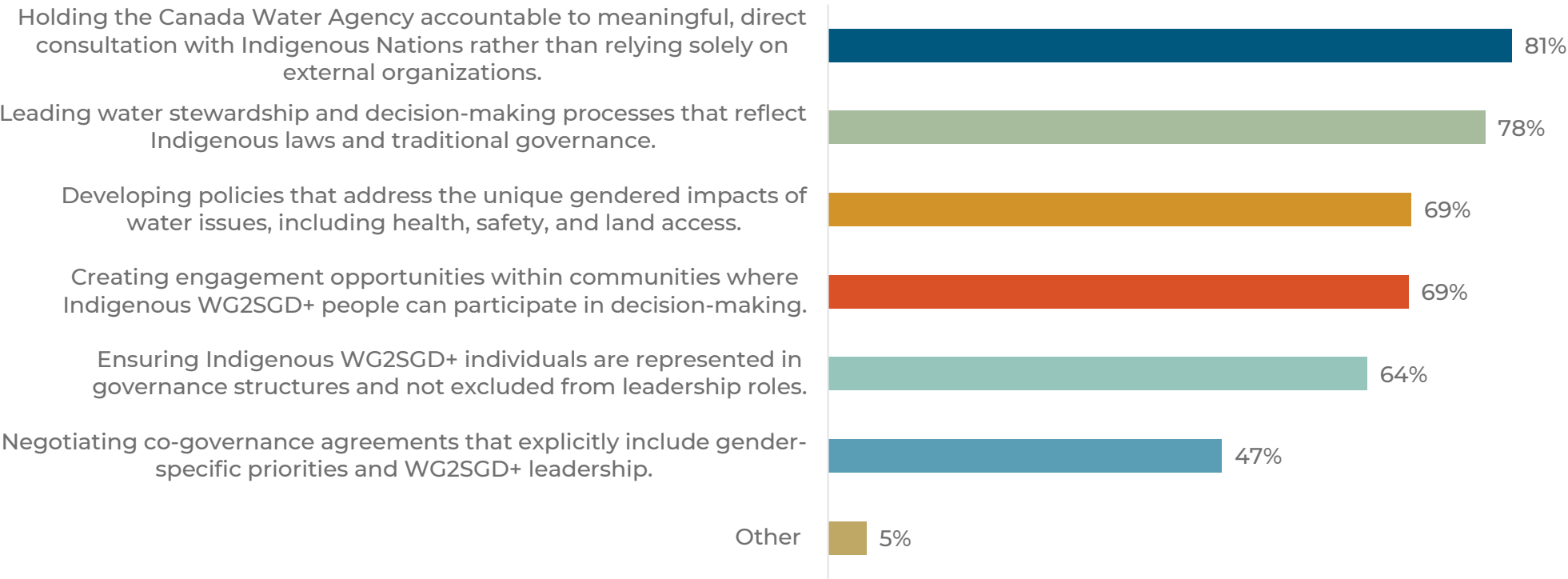
NWAC is not a rights holding entity, but it is an Indigenous women-led advocacy organization with regional offices across Turtle Island and Inuit Nunangat by way of our PTMAs. As such, we have both the resources and connections that offer knowledge of the languages, cultural protocols, history, and frontline water conditions of different Indigenous communities which the CWA may be detached from. As such, NWAC and other incredible Indigenous-led organizations across Turtle Island and Inuit Nunangat should not be overlooked as essential collaborators to support Indigenous co-governance and engagement. The CWA cannot in good conscious approach engagements without considering all potential ways of ensuring engagements commence at the highest standard of practice – according to Indigenous expectations.



# Roles and responsibilities | **Indigenous governments & communities**

Most respondents believe Indigenous governments should play a key role in holding the CWA accountable for direct consultation with Indigenous Nations (81%) and in ensuring decisions reflect Indigenous laws and governance(78%). Many believe Indigenous governments should develop policies to address gendered impacts of water issues (69%), create community-driven engagement opportunities (69%), and ensure WG2SGD+ people are represented in leadership (64%). Nearly half (47%) believe they should negotiate co-governance agreements that centre gender-specific priorities.

**Q. 4** *What role should Indigenous governments and communities play in ensuring Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples are meaningfully engaged by the Canada Water Agency (CWA)?*



## Roles and responsibilities **Indigenous governments & communities**

Being that Indigenous governments and communities are rights holders; it is crucial that the CWA honors their rights to water. In contrast to the roles and responsibilities of Indigenous organizations that are largely facilitative, Indigenous governments and communities should be given leadership roles that allow them to influence decision making that affects their lands, waters, and people.

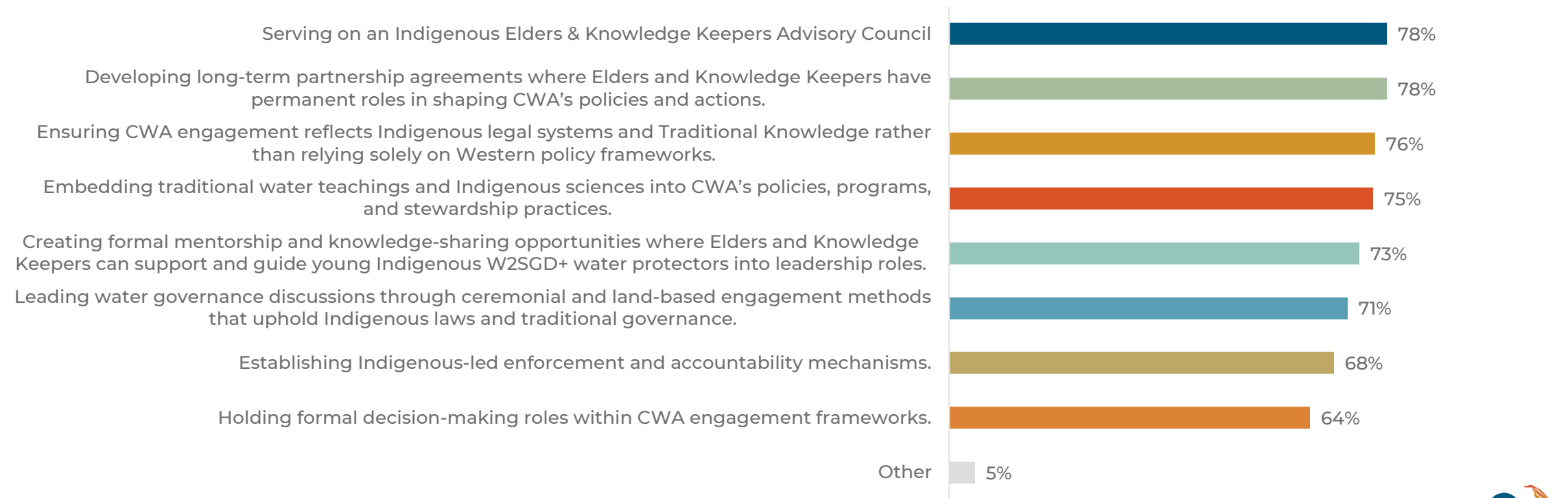
In respect of gender inclusive co-governance, they should also be given the responsibility to define gender related policies and inclusivity frameworks, because it is they who have relationships with Indigenous WG2SGD+ people. Under good practice, the CWA must ensure that gender equality is prioritized in such delegations and leadership, because while Indigenous WG2SGD+ people should be represented, they should also have the platform to voice their own experiences and perspectives.



# Roles and responsibilities | Elders

A majority of respondents believe Elders and Knowledge Keepers should serve on advisory councils (78%), hold permanent roles in shaping CWA policy (78%), guide engagement through Indigenous laws and knowledge (76%), and embed traditional teachings into programs (75%). Most also emphasized their role in mentorship (73%), ceremonial leadership (71%), Indigenous-led accountability (68%), and decision-making related to CWA engagement frameworks (64%).

**Q. 5**    *What role(s) should Elders and Knowledge Keepers – particularly those who identify as women, Two Spirit, or gender diverse – have within freshwater decision making?*





## Roles and responsibilities

### Elders

This reflects a deeply held value in Indigenous communities: Elders are our leaders. Their involvement should not be symbolic—it should be required. For many Indigenous communities, it is women Elders who have historically led water decision-making due to their sacred role as life-givers. Furthermore, women and Two Spirit Elders carry unique lived experiences that allow them to speak to the intersectional realities that must be considered in water policy.

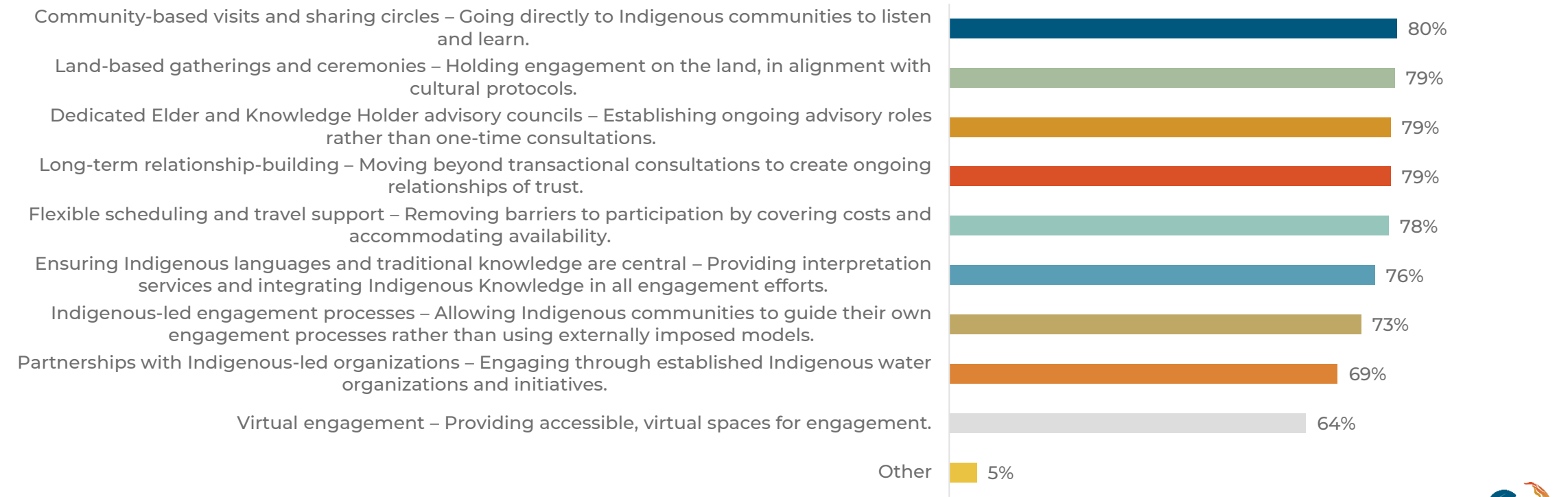
Meaningful engagement must go beyond broad, general consultation and instead specifically involve women and Two Spirit Elders in formal decision-making roles, long-term partnerships; and ceremonial, land-based governance methods – as is reflected and supported by these findings. Their leadership is central to any engagement framework that seeks to respect and uphold Indigenous WG2SGD+ rights, knowledge systems, and governance traditions.



# Roles and responsibilities | **Considerations**

The majority of respondents emphasized the importance of community-based visits (80%), land-based gatherings (79%), and Elder advisory councils (79%) as core considerations. Other considerations include long-term relationship-building (79%), reducing barriers to participation (78%), integrating Indigenous knowledge and language into engagements (76%), and supporting Indigenous-led processes (73%), partnerships (69%), and accessible virtual spaces (64%).

**Q. 6**    *What considerations must be met when engaging Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers—particularly women, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse leaders?*



## Roles and responsibilities

# Considerations

It is essential to recognize that the CWA is housed within the institution that for many generations has contributed to the erosion of trust and the marginalization of Indigenous Peoples. Our Elders are the survivors of those efforts, and in many ways continue to carry the consequences that persist today. For this reason, the CWA has a responsibility to be accountable to its position and move in a better way than has been done in the past.

Engaging Elders—particularly Indigenous women, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse leaders—must be done in a good way: with humility, reciprocity, and a commitment to doing better. That means supporting ceremony, creating long-term relationships rather than one-off consultations, covering costs and address needs, respecting Indigenous legal orders, and centering Traditional Knowledge. If the CWA is serious about co-governance, it must prioritize Elders not as symbolic participants, but as foundational leaders, and engage with them in a manner that upholds their dignity and respects the sacred responsibilities they carry.



# SECTION 3

# **FINAL COMMENTS**

Additional advice, considerations, and ideas from Indigenous  
WG2SGD+ Peoples.

# Final comments | Ensuring meaningful engagement

The following slides present recommendations directly from Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples. Participants emphasized the importance of inclusive and equitable participation, honouring Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices, building capacity and empowering communities, ensuring accountability and meaningful implementation, and fostering relational engagement through trust and respect.

**Q. 7** *What additional advice, considerations, or ideas do you have to ensure the Canada Water Agency’s engagement with Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples is truly meaningful and not performative?*

Inclusive & Equitable Participation	Respect for Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Practices	Capacity Building and Community Empowerment	Accountability and Meaningful Implementation	Relational Engagement and Trust-Building
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Emphasizes including all Indigenous voices, especially off-reserve members and WG2SGD+ individuals.</li><li>Highlights fairness, equal footing, and non-performative inclusion.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Calls for recognition of traditional knowledge, ceremony, Elders and Knowledge Keepers, and self-governance.</li><li>Includes integrating cultural protocols into engagement processes.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Focuses on funding, training, leadership development, and youth empowerment.</li><li>Supports community-led initiatives and local environmental monitoring.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Stresses the importance of action, follow-through, transparency, and using input in decision-making.</li><li>Includes mechanisms like advisory councils and workplans.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Encourages direct community visits, in-person meetings, trauma-informed approaches, and long-term relationship-building.</li><li>Promotes culturally competent and empathetic interactions.</li></ul>



## Final comments | **Inclusive & Equitable Participation**

This theme reflects a strong emphasis on ensuring all Indigenous voices are meaningfully included, WG2SGD+ individuals. Respondents highlighted the importance of fairness, equal footing, and avoiding tokenistic or performative approaches, calling for inclusion that is intentional, representative, and rooted in respect.



Make sure everyone is included in in this project, keep the process **transparent**, and have access to the discussions, topics and decisions on an ongoing basis.



Include everyone, not just certain First Nations suffering, **we should all be working together for our future generations.**



Lots of advance **notice**, lots of **outreach**, lots of advertising education and **sharing in advance** to include Indigenous input into developing the engagement and communication strategies and agendas etc.



Put **information in spaces where it will be seen** by the demographic you seek to include. I don't follow the CWA online but if a poster for involvement was at my local daycare or ON early years centre I would see it.



## Final comments | **Respect for Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Practices**

Respondents highlighted the need for recognition and integration of traditional knowledge, ceremony, and cultural protocols into engagement processes. This includes honouring the roles of Elders and Knowledge Keepers and respecting Indigenous systems of governance and decision-making as central, not secondary, to water governance.



A group effort between Elders, the young, the Canada Water Agency to **make people understand the ongoing concerns & future concerns that will occur if we all do not work together.**



Engage in **cultural competency training** paid by CWA for their leadership and staff to learn about Indigenous ways of knowing, worldviews, and the traditional roles and responsibilities of women as water carriers.



The **policy makers of the CWA need to be getting out on the land and stand by and in the water, do ceremony with Elders and Knowledge Keepers.** Also, they need to be mentoring the young people to take up their roles.



At the end of this discussion, the **Elder should be encouraged to do a ceremony to bless the discussion and pray that the forum is blessed with strength.**



## Final comments | **Capacity Building and Community Empowerment**

This theme focuses on the need for training and leadership development in order to empower Indigenous communities, especially WG2SGD+ Peoples to lead the conversations. There is strong support for initiatives led within the community and going beyond just involving Indigenous Peoples to actively ensure they are equipped to lead the process.

Give us a chance to **pick our own representatives at the table.**

**Walk with Indigenous People and learn from us**

Indigenous knowledge elders, especially **Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals, are important to water governance.** The Canada Water Agency should create space for their leadership and also ensure their **voices are not only heard but also integrated** into decision-making frameworks.

**Funding for monitoring and capacity to train and hire positions in the community.**

Reminder that **our elders tell us that our lands had their own laws** within our culture. They were here before the Western laws came into place. **It is a delicate balance of respect, love and caretaking of our natural energy and resources.**





## Final comments | **Accountability and Meaningful Implementation**

Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples stressed that engagement must be followed by clear, transparent action and ongoing accountability. This includes creating advisory councils, co-developed workplans, and regular reporting to show how Indigenous input has shaped outcomes. Demonstrating how Indigenous feedback has been captured is not enough; recommendations need to be implemented.



All discussions – whether by phone, virtual, in person – need to be recorded and shared to everyone, not a select few. **Accountability is speaking the truth, not twisting it to suit the agency .**



**The agency must be legally obligated to follow through on commitments, not just offer symbolic gestures.**

[There should be a Third-Party Indigenous Oversight Body] This body should evaluate whether the agency is meeting its commitments and report publicly. Indigenous leaders should co-author official reports tracking whether the agency is advancing Indigenous-led water governance.



**Transparency and accountability are always crucial. Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples should have direct decision-making power rather than being confined to advisory roles.** Clear commitments must be made—written into policies, agreements, and funding structures—that ensure Indigenous leadership is not symbolic but has real influence over water governance decisions. A strong feedback mechanism should be established, where Indigenous participants can see how their input is shaping policies and programs. Without this, engagement remains a checkbox exercise rather than a true partnership. Ultimately, **meaningful engagement requires a fundamental shift in power—one that recognizes Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples not as participants in water governance but as leaders and rights-holders whose laws, knowledge, and governance systems must be upheld and resourced accordingly.**



## Final comments | **Relational Engagement and Trust-Building**

It is especially important to approach engagements in a way that is focused on relationship-building and trust. This sort of relationship is built through consistent implantation of feedback and demonstrating how feedback is effectively implemented. It also relies on a long-term process of relationship building that can lead to co-governance. Recognizing that engagements need to be empathetic, trauma-informed, and directly in the community is a first step in this direction.

“**Meaningful engagement** through long term relationship building, co-development of plans, capacity building, integration of Indigenous knowledge **towards achievement of a sustainable future.**”

“**Trust** is definitely needed. Build a trusting relationship.”

“I believe in partnerships that are **mutually respected** and building strong relationships.”

“Advice is to get a facilitation team that is **culturally aware, competent at facilitating, kind, and willing to partake in cultural protocols and or ceremony.** **Evaluation** of engagement is a must, maybe by a third party or community-based evaluations if capacity exists. **Engagement outcomes** must be acknowledged and used to inform shared decision-making among Indigenous communities, governments, and other stakeholders/rights holders. Creative and culturally appropriate **knowledge mobilization approaches** needed.”



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