

ENGAGE.EU Winter School “Cultural Perspectives on Sustainability”

Workshop title: Learning from Rivers: Indigenous Knowledge and Sustainable Futures

Lecturer + Status & affiliation:

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Workshop description:

Rivers are often understood as natural resources to be managed, exploited, or protected. Indigenous knowledge systems, however, frequently approach rivers as living entities embedded in networks of reciprocity, responsibility, and more-than-human relations. This workshop explores how Indigenous perspectives challenge dominant Western understandings of sustainability and offer alternative ways of thinking about human-environment relations.

Importantly, many of these perspectives predate the emergence of sustainability as a modern concept. Long before sustainability became a central concern of international policy, Indigenous communities around the world had developed sophisticated systems of environmental stewardship, relational ethics, and resource management grounded in centuries of lived experience. Rather than treating Indigenous knowledge as a recent addition to sustainability debates, the workshop examines it as a long-standing body of knowledge that raises fundamental questions about the assumptions underlying contemporary approaches to environmental governance and development.

Drawing on three distinct cultural contexts, participants will examine how sustainability is conceptualized and practiced beyond technocratic frameworks. First, the Andean concept of *Buen Vivir* (*Sumak Kawsay*) will be introduced as a relational philosophy that prioritizes communal well-being and harmony with the natural world over economic growth. Second, participants will explore Siberian Indigenous and shamanic traditions that understand rivers, landscapes, and non-human beings as agentive partners in a shared world. Third, the workshop will engage with Indigenous communities in India, focusing on their river-centred ecological knowledge and sustainable resource management practices.

Through case studies, discussion, and collaborative exercises, participants will reflect on what contemporary sustainability debates can learn from Indigenous ways of knowing and from alternative conceptions of environmental responsibility.

Learning objectives:

- ***Buen Vivir/Sumak Kawsay* (Ecuador/Bolivia):** constitutional recognition of nature, relational understandings of well-being, critiques of extractivism.
- **Siberian Indigenous traditions (e.g. Evenki or Sakha/Yakut):** rivers and landscapes as living entities; shamanic practices emphasizing reciprocity with human and non-human beings.
- **Adivasi communities in India (e.g. Dongria Kondh):** resistance to environmentally destructive mining projects; place-based ecological knowledge and sustainable land and water management.
- Comparative analysis of how different Indigenous communities conceptualize rivers as members of ecological and social communities.