

Climate-induced loss is impeding human rights in the Pacific, new study finds

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Yams in baskets for sale at the Port Vila markets, Vanuatu 2018. Credit: Ross Westoby, Griffith University Climate Action Beacon

Climate change is impeding the human rights of a large group of people living in the Pacific, a new [report](#) in *Nature Climate Change* reveals.

The paper substantiates a submission to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the legal responsibility of countries to act on [climate change](#).

Evidence gathered in Vanuatu supports a clarification on loss and damage finance which could activate powerful legal tools to hold polluters accountable.

Research Fellow at the Griffith University Climate Action Beacon, Dr. Ross Westoby said the report explores how climate-induced loss and damage in the Pacific is already occurring and outlines what can be done in response.

"Our findings show loss and damage to fundamental [human rights](#) is already occurring, will worsen, and undermine the right to a life of dignity," Dr. Westoby said.

"Bringing a human rights lens to climate change is new and seeks to shift the focus and attention onto the individual experiences of those suffering its impacts."

"If we don't share the burden of mitigation and adaptation, we must share responsibility for violating someone's human rights."

"At the national level, human rights impact assessments can inform national and sectoral policy planning and budgeting, ensuring climate

policies align with affected peoples' needs and rights and that effective redress is established with transparency and accountability."

"The detailed findings on the nature of and the experiences of loss and damage should inform [climate policy](#), guiding international and national activities on what should be funded and targeted for effective redress and adaptation."

Researchers found the most severe loss and damage now undermining the rights of Ni-Vanuatu are related to the right to a healthy environment and the ability to own, use, develop and control lands.

Climate change also effects rights to property, communal assets, standard of living, and family and social cohesion.

Examples of climate-induced loss include:

- Loss of traditional medicines that impact people's identity, health, human life, and well-being
- Loss of infrastructure and precious [cultural heritage](#) such as gravesites due to flooding of low-lying areas, which also causes salinization of freshwater tables and impinges on potable water
- Reef degradation, increased [coral bleaching](#) and outbreaks of crown-of-thorns starfish are a result of increased ocean temperatures and [ocean acidification](#), which cascades into diminishing fishing resources and marine wildlife losses
- Loss of identity and loss of traditional and cultural food sources is a result of the cascading effects of climate change affecting people's diet, and human health

"An example and symbol of the cascading effects of climate change on human rights is the destruction of the yam," Dr. Westoby said.

"The yam is a traditional root crop and staple food widely used in Vanuatu and elsewhere in the Pacific Islands region and is the primary commodity of value for exchange."

"Rituals, rites, and customs of the yam are the main social fabric that binds kinship groups, tribes, communities, and society."

Recommended approaches for addressing [climate](#) change impacts on human rights with the active participation of those most affected include:

- Investment in education to improve recovery capacity and resilience and empower people to act and understand their rights
- Recording and safeguarding Indigenous knowledge for future generations
- Promoting cultural continuation to ensure the transmission of meanings, values, and historical traditions through generations
- Building resilience through post-disaster planning to restore infrastructure and societal systems
- Preservation of socio-ecological systems which underpin culture, community, well-being, and identity

More information: McNamara, K.E. et al, Using a human rights lens to understand and address loss and damage, *Nature Climate Change* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/s41558-023-01831-0](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-023-01831-0).
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Provided by Griffith University

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