

“We are not safe anymore”

climate change as a human rights challenge for the people of Vanuatu



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Overview of the issue

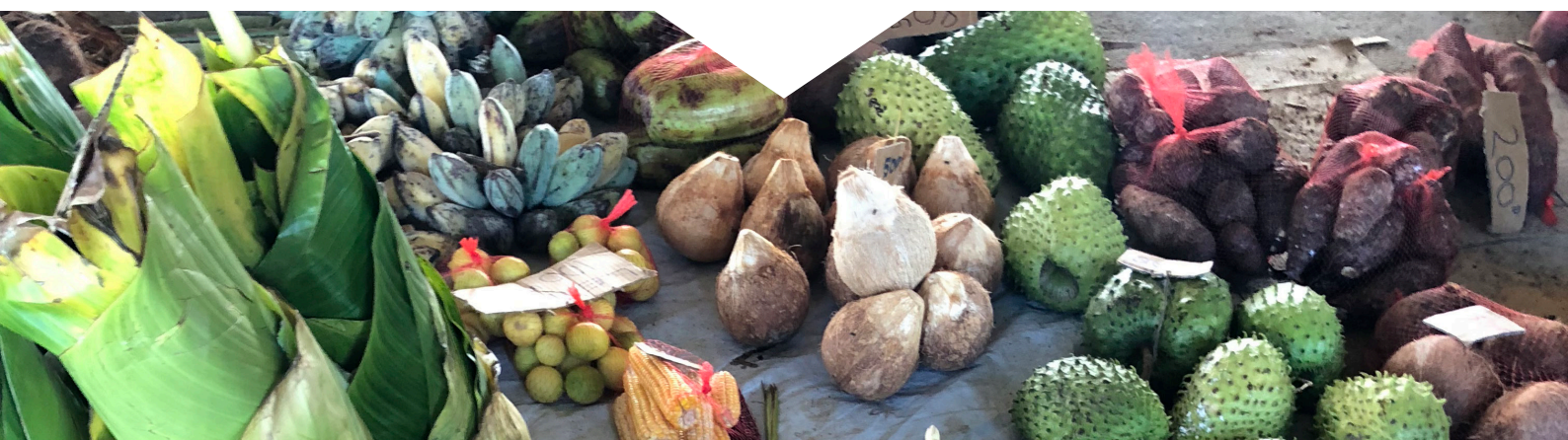
Climate change has been labelled ‘the human rights challenge of the twenty-first century’ (Toussaint & Blanco, 2020: 743).

Human rights frameworks, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, among others, must become part of the solution. We all have an obligation to prevent the foreseeable adverse effects of climate change and ensure that those affected by it have access to appropriate remedies and means of adaptation (OHCHR, 2015).

All aspects of a life of human dignity are affected by climate change. In terms of civil and political rights, climate change has impacts on the right to life, liberty, and property. In terms of economic, social, and cultural rights, climate change has impacts on the right to work, education, social security, adequate food, clothing and housing, and the right to achieve the highest attainable standards of physical and mental health, and continually improve

living conditions. As a society, climate change also affects our collective rights, such as the right to development, self-determination, peace, a healthy environment, and minority rights more generally.

Human rights framings of climate change impacts can be important for amplifying the voices and interests of those that are often sidelined, evoking greater moral urgency, and helping mobilise political action for climate justice (Bodansky, 2010; Dreher & Voyer, 2015). It is critical that Pacific Islanders are portrayed not as ‘victims’ or ‘proof’ of climate change, but ‘as real people with dignity and dreams for the future’ (Dreher & Voyer, 2015: 67). This study seeks to support climate justice framings and efforts to amplify the voices of those most affected, especially in international forums. Sharing stories and place-based evidence can be a powerful and convincing tool for action on climate change if they fully represent the human rights and self-determination of Pacific Islanders (Dreher & Voyer, 2015).



Study aim and method

- The aim of this study is to explore how locals in Vanuatu experience the impacts of climate change and how these impacts can impinge on their human rights
- An online survey, with both quantitative and qualitative questions, was administered through Checkbox in Bislama, English and French
- This policy brief is based on the responses of 87 ni-Vanuatu participants who completed the survey between the 18-28 June 2022
- Quantitative data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) v27 and qualitative data was analysed manually through content analysis to identify key themes
- Human ethics approval for the study was granted from the University of Queensland (approval number: 2020000640) and all participants consented to participating in the study

Overview of study participants

Participants included 44 females, 37 males, 5 who preferred to self-identify and 1 non-response. The age range for participants was from 22 to 76 years old, with a mean age of 37 years old.

Participants were predominately born in Shefa province (41.8%), followed by Tafea (17.7%), Penama (15.2%), Sanma (11.4%), Malampa (10.1%), and Torba (3.8%). This was slightly different to where participants currently live, which was largely Shefa province (75.3%), followed by Sanma (16.1%), Tafea (4.9%), Malampa (2.5%), and Penama (1.2%).

As for formal education or training (participants could select more than one option), most participants indicated that they hold a bachelor's degree (49.4%), followed by a master's degree (22.9%), high school certificate (19.3%), technical training (13.3%), elementary school certification (6.0%), or a PhD (1.2%).

Participants, who could select more than one option, are holders of vast local and/or Indigenous knowledge related to crops (76.6% of participants), plants and animals (50.6%), weather (46.8%), forests (44.2%),

medicine (41.6%), fishing (35.1%), weaving (29.9%), marine life (27.3%), rivers (15.6%), pest and disease on crops and animals (15.6%), and carving (9.1%).

Participants predominately earned an income through government work (37.3% of respondents), 'Other' activities such as volunteering or working for NGOs (22.9%), being a private business employee (15.7%), through farming (9.6%), being a private business owner (6.1%), having money sent from others (3.6%), through handicrafts or fishing (both 1.2%) or had no income (2.4%).

Experiences of climate change

Participants were asked to consider how much the impacts of climate change have affected their everyday life over the last year using a 4-point scale (where 0=not at all, 1=little, 2=medium, 3=high, and 4=very high). The majority of participants (72.5%) selected 'very high' or 'high', with only 23.2% selecting 'medium' and 4.3% selecting 'little'.

Participants provided some specific examples of how the impacts of climate change affect their everyday life now and how they expect it to affect them into the



future. Many participants emphasised their observations of changing weather: “more intense cyclones, longer dry periods, more frequent and intense extreme rainfall”, “extreme weather and slow onset events... increase[d] temperature and humidity [which] transpire into heavy torrential rains that ha[s] increased over the years” (participants #27 and #44).

These changes have had, and continue to have, significant impacts on several aspects of the participants’ lives, including food security as “more intense cyclones – cause damage to food crops” or “crops are much smaller” and “flooding caused by heavy rain caused my backyard garden to die” (participants #5, #45 and #6). One participant shared their concerns that “we have to find new varieties of food that are able to grow despite the different weathers” and that “in the future, it would be hard to grow food the traditional way” (participant #45). More intense cyclones and prolonged, intense rainfall also cause significant economic losses through “damage to infrastructure – roads, housing, schools, [and] clinics/hospitals”, with the “road infrastructure... getting worse year by year” (participants #27 and #44). Health concerns were also prevalent, with “outbreaks of water-related diseases like leptospirosis, cholera, dengue fever, diarrhoea, etc” being observed (participant #5). Other intangible impacts to surrounding environments and biodiversity were also shared, with “less

birds seen around... [due to] unknown bird species eat[ing] up all good/traditional bird eggs” or “less fish in the coast” (participant #6).

Human rights and climate change

To gain a deeper understanding of how people’s rights to a life of human dignity are affected, participants were asked to indicate how much, using a 4-point scale (where 0=not at all, 1=little, 2=medium, 3=high, and 4=very high), certain aspects of their lives have been impacted. In particular, participants were asked to consider implications on their standard of living, property and assets, culture and traditional knowledge, family and social cohesion, local environment, place and ‘home’ as well as identity, agency, and security. Where possible, participants were asked to provide examples to illustrate what has been affected, how, and why.

The following infographic provides details of each of the human rights ‘groupings’ that have been pulled from relevant international human rights articles, and how participants understand climate change to be affecting these rights. It was clear how climate change impacts can result in cascading implications on numerous, interconnected human rights groupings.

References

Bodansky D (2010) ‘Introduction: climate change and human rights: unpacking the issues’, *Georgia Journal of International and Comparative Law*, 38, 511-524.

Dreher T and Voyer M (2015) ‘Climate refugees or migrants? Contesting media frames on climate justice in the Pacific’, *Environmental Communication*, 9 (1), 58-76.

OHCHR (2015) *Understanding Human Rights and Climate Change*, Submission of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to the 21st Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, OHCHR, New York.

Toussaint P and Blanco AM (2020) ‘A human rights-based approach to loss and damage under the climate change regime’, *Climate Policy*, 20 (6), 743-757.

Local environment (i.e., land, sea, rivers, forests, biodiversity and ability to own, use, develop and control your lands) (n=39 responses)
UNDRIP (Articles 2, 26.1 & 29.1)

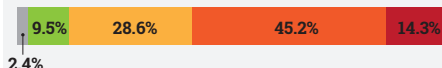


"Loss of biodiversity and ecosystems are becoming a major threat to human livelihood because we have that strong connection to nature or environment as an organism in a food chain" (participant #59)

"The degradation of marine resources and coastal degradation due to sea-level rise. Coral bleaching causes a shortage to fish among our community members, which push[es] us to depend on goods from the shops" (participant #42)

"Most of our forests have been washed away by heavy rainfall and we lost all our medicinal plants for family use" (participant #40)

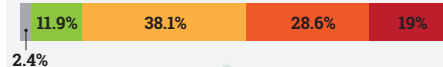
Property and communal assets (i.e., individual property such as homes and boats, and communal assets such as wells, bores, nakamals, schools) (n=42 responses)
UDHR (Article 17)



"In our village, our house was destroyed by cyclones. When heavy winds blow, it blows branches to the roofs and also to the water source, wells, tanks. This cause[s] our house to [be] damaged and our water source to be contaminated. Heavy rains cause our animals to die" (participant #23)

"We have nakamals [traditional meeting places] that are destroyed by the rains, and roads [are also destroyed], even in our capital Port Vila. And those rains are not normal" (participant #42)

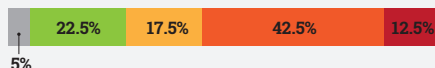
Standard of living (i.e., access to food and water, education, reliable income and work, means of subsistence, social and health services, physical and mental health) (n=42 responses)
UDHR (Articles 23-26), ICCPR (Article 1.2), ICESCR (Articles 1.2, 6.1, 11.1, 11.2, 12.1 & 13.1), UNDRIP (Articles 14.2, 21.1 & 24.2)



"Our standard of living is experiencing a stark reality of adjusting to the changing environment norms. My family source of income is small scale fishing. We have experienced a change in weather patterns compared to decades ago" (participant #44)

"Access to fresh food is significantly affected after severe cyclones, storms, and flooding... access to fresh safe drinking water can also be affected" (participant #55)

Family and social cohesion (i.e., to have a family, as the natural and fundamental group unit of society, and the bonds and bridges that bind community life) (n=40 responses)
UDHR (Article 16), ICCPR (Articles 23.1 & 23.2), ICESCR (Article 10.1)

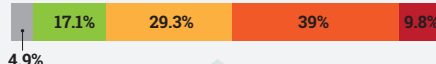


"Because of climate change, our community protocols have no longer been followed and all our families are falling apart" (participant #40)

"The bad harvest from the garden and the destruction of our infrastructure and houses by climate change creates tension in our households and between our families" (participant #42)

"All examples are linked, again weather patterns and poor productivity of crops in Vanuatu, draining out most males to work abroad and it does affect families" (participant #47)

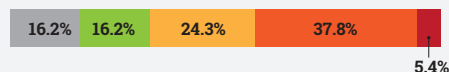
Cultural life, traditions, customs, and traditional knowledge (i.e., spiritual, religious traditions, and traditional medicines, and ability to pass these down through generations) (n=41 responses)
UDHR (Article 27), ICESCR (Article 27), UNDRIP (Articles 8.1, 11.1, 12.1, 13.1, 24.1 & 31.1)



"Herbs & trees used for local remedies are getting scarcer. Loss of traditional landmarks due to increase in 'natural' disasters. Loss of local recipes, [and] ways of preserving food as ingredients are becoming difficult to obtain or find" (participant #41)

"Big changes in food crop harvests like yams. The yams are significant in our culture. Its harvest is marked by special cultural rituals and ceremonies, but the climate has affected the harvest sessions which resulted in a big delay in harvest" (participant #42)

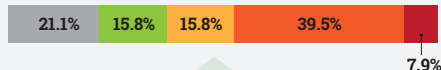
Freedom, peace, and security (i.e., to live as a distinct peoples and not be subjected to any act of violence or harm) (n=37 responses)
UDHR (Article 3), ICCPR (Article 6.1), UNDRIP (Articles 7.1 & 7.2)



"I believe freedom and peace are affected by the thoughts of the future, especially the impacts of climate change on our next generations. Life will be very costly and dangerous" (participant #47)

"We are not safe anymore, especially considering the recent IPCC report painting a stark reality for the Pacific as usually quoted the 'canary in the coal mine'. Every time our children hear about a cyclone coming, it is for them reimagining the past occurrences" (participant #44)

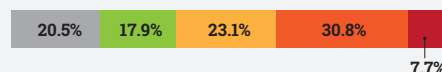
Self-determination and agency (i.e., your ability to freely pursue economic, social, and cultural development, participate in decision-making, and freely make decisions about your life and the things that affect it) (n=38 responses)
ICCPR (Article 1.1), ICESCR (Article 1.1), UNDRIP (Articles 3, 20.1, 23 & 32.1)



"When I am relocated to live in a different place due to climate change, I lost all my pandanus plants, like making money. Pandanus is my bank. I do not have a bank account, but all my coconut plants, pandanus plants are my bank to me" (participant #40)

"I think our self-determination ability is affected to some degree especially to pursue economic aspirations because you're limited by your budget and capacity [by] always [being] in the recovery process all the time" (participant #44)

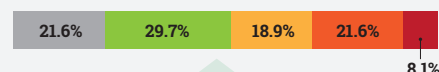
Identity (i.e., who you are as a person and what you value in accordance with customs and traditions) (n=39 responses)
UNDRIP (Article 33.1)



"As an individual, I feel like [the] impacts of climate change have had some impact on who I am as a person. I still believe in what my grandfathers have taught me about traditional weather knowledge and traditional medicines, although I've lost belief in some" (participant #56)

"If the situation keeps on escalating, then I will definitely lose my identity as a tribe of the yam, because people will not be regarding my tribe anymore and disrespecting us" (participant #44)

Place and land you call 'home' (i.e., any disruptions due to displacement, relocation, or migration) (n=37 responses)
UDHR (Articles 13 & 15), ICCPR (Article 12.1), UNDRIP (Articles 6, 9 & 10)



"Losing our coastal lands due to sea-level rise and our houses due to cyclones push us to find places in high lands and also to re-build houses that feel like living in someone [else's] house. The feeling of belonging has changed and lost over time" (participant #42)

Percentage of participant responses

