

Putting human rights in the centre

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The global loss and damage fund is essential to provide support for climate-impacted groups and help their local initiatives for adaptation. Now, research focusing on the Vanuatu population highlights the necessity to put human rights as a central consideration for loss and damage fund agendas.

Climate change is more than just melting ice and intensifying weather events; it is also one of the gravest human rights challenges of this century. Yet, there is little research exploring how climate change is impacting on the human rights of people living in small islands around the globe. Now, writing in *Nature Climate Change*, Karen McNamara and colleagues¹ demonstrate how climate change is negatively affecting human rights, using the experiences of people from Vanuatu, a small island developing state in the Pacific Ocean, as a powerful example. The results of this survey reveal that the impacts of climate change are causing severe infringements of the human rights of Ni-Vanuatu (people from Vanuatu), particularly their right to a healthy environment and their ability to own, use, develop and control lands. This situation is expected to deteriorate in the future.

At a national level, the Government of Vanuatu faces a multitude of climate change challenges, but it is not remaining passive. Globally, Vanuatu is fighting to get the international community – particularly Global North countries – to acknowledge their legal responsibilities for taking large-scale actions to address climate change. It first pushed for the establishment of a global loss and damage fund, which was finally agreed to at COP27. Then, it requested the International Court of Justice to launch an investigation into how climate change is impacting on people's human rights as well as countries' legal responsibilities for addressing climate-related harms. By securing an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice, Vanuatu and highly vulnerable Global South nations are hoping for formal recognition of how climate change is negatively affecting their citizens' basic human rights. They also hope that the court's decision (yet to be made as of October 2023) can provide a legal precedent that will allow them and other Global South countries to take legal action against polluters and hold them legally accountable for their greenhouse gas emissions.

Given the importance of understanding the climate-related harms in highly vulnerable regions, McNamara and colleagues surveyed Ni-Vanuatu about how climate change was personally affecting them and explored what can be done in response. Participants shared their personal experiences with the changing climate. Saltwater seeps or sometimes floods onto their land and into freshwater tables. Crops sometimes fail and water becomes undrinkable due to extreme weather events. In the meantime, the increases in ocean temperature and acidification induce the increased coral bleaching and marine life losses. Climate change is, therefore, already causing loss and




damage to Ni-Vanuatu's fundamental human rights to food, water and health. Loss and damage to one human right often has cascading impacts on numerous other interconnected human rights, including culture, Indigenous knowledge systems, agency and identities. One striking example reported by McNamara and colleagues is the impacts of climate change on yams. Numerous species of yams are grown in family gardens across Vanuatu², with yams being both a staple food and a culturally important non-human being for Ni-Vanuatu communities. Yam exchanges between communities help to foster social cohesion, maintain cultural identities and ensure food resources are shared between households and villages^{3,4}. However, climate change is making it harder for Ni-Vanuatu to cultivate yams, with yam gardens regularly destroyed by tropical cyclones and droughts. Ni-Vanuatu communities stand to lose a food source and a key component of their cultural identities if they can no longer grow yams in the future due to climate change.

To assist those countries most at risk from climate change, McNamara and colleagues have put forward recommendations to the United Nations transitional committee of the global loss and damage fund on what the rules should be regarding allocations. They stress the need to adopt a human-rights-centric approach to loss and damage and urge the loss and damage transitional committee to design a funding scheme that supports local initiatives that protect human rights⁵. In Vanuatu, the authors spotlight interventions such as preserving Indigenous knowledge, restoring ecosystems, supporting post-disaster rebuilds, offering learning opportunities and compensating for climate-induced damages^{6,7}. They assert that compensating countries such as Vanuatu is a critical response to climate-related human rights violations, supplementing existing adaptation and mitigation efforts.

By situating the conversation about loss and damage to human rights, the work of McNamara and colleagues reminds us of the moral obligations that underpin our current and future climate actions. It is imperative to ensure that policies, governance and funding mechanisms enacted now and in the future are designed to staunchly defend the rights of those most affected by the climate emergency.

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.