

Marshall Islands Case Study

Loss and Damage Transitional Committee Submission

The Marshall Islands is a small island large ocean state comprised of 34 atolls and islands with an average elevation of two meters. Due to the impacts of climate change, loss and damage is a sensitive yet urgent issue. There have been limited, nascent activities conducted in direct response to loss and damage in the Marshall Islands. These activities are current examples of possible activities that may be replicated at a larger scale that *can* be used to respond to loss and damage.. The intent of this case study is to highlight examples of loss and damage in the Marshall Islands, and the attempts to respond at the country level.

Marshallese culture, not unlike other Pacific countries as well as indigenous cultures worldwide, is one that is deeply tied to the land. Culturally this connection is demonstrated by a knowledge system with stories, proverbs, and songs that have been passed down generationally and that are unique to each the atoll, the islet, and even the weto (parcel of land) on which you may be situated. Another demonstration of this connection is a complicated land tenure system that enables all Marshall Islanders to claim parcels of land, also known as wetos, throughout the country, at various or multiple atolls, and that are organized through a stratified system that includes alaps (land owners), iroojdrik (lesser chiefs), and iroojlaplap (high chiefs).

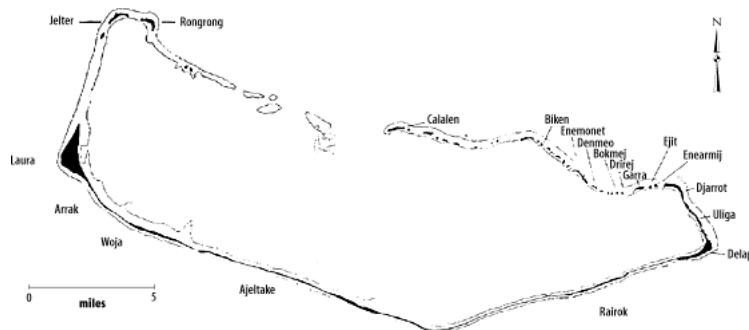
Firstly we would like to provide some examples of loss and damage in our country, following which we will seek to identify possible activities to address loss and damage.

In the Marshall Islands, a key concern continues to be slow on-set loss and damage, and non-economic losses and damages.

Through community consultations as part of our National Adaptation Plan (NAP) development, there are local accounts and evidence already that illustrate a range of losses and damages which have been occurring and expected to continue even while plans for adaptation are in development. For example, land-owners in Kalelen have attested to the changes on an islet known as Ellekan, that 10 years ago produced pandanus and coconut trees but has since been reduced to a sandbar due to frequent overwash from higher tides. According to Yoster Harris, a landowner and caretaker of the islet, it was once was a site of coconut and pandanus trees that allowed for harvesting and even for camping less than ten years ago, estimated at around 2012. The photograph and map below are provided for context.



Photograph of Yoster Harris, Landowner for Kalalen, on the islet of Ellekan



A map of Kalalen (spelled as Calelen here) where it is located on Majuro atoll.

In addition to this specific case, there is likely to be an increase of unavoidable loss and damage as a consequence of required adaptation. A link between the two issues is especially present with the required migration and relocation of communities. For example - once communities are relocated for land elevation, the loss of economic livelihoods that came from the land the community originally lived in, as well as the cultural knowledge associated with that specific parcel of land, would present permanent loss and damage. Weaving continues to be an important aspect of cultural and economic livelihood for many women to help sustain their families – this will no longer be possible if a weaver is removed from a particular grove of pandanus trees for example, on which she relies on for her materials. An additional example of expected loss is the loss of shorelines that will have to be changed drastically through the construction of large sea walls, and the livelihoods which rely on those shorelines for shells for weaving or for food. The mass amount of cultural knowledge that will be lost in these adaptation pathways cannot be overstated – there may be stories, proverbs, and knowledges tied to specific parcels of land that will be lost due to this required adaptation.

With this in mind, proposed activities to respond would be aimed at replenishing lost income for community members who derived their livelihoods and food from the impacted areas. In addition to lost income, to target the loss of knowledge, it is recommended that funding be provided for curriculum development.

An small scale example of curriculum development which is tied to cultural knowledge is the UNDP Ridge to Reef. Ridge to Reef is a five-year project designed to strengthen natural resource management in atoll communities, to protect biodiversity and sustain livelihood, employing an integrated management approach. A smaller component of this project is a partnership with the local youth environmental organization Jo-Jikum. Through this partnership, Marshallese youth travel to an outer island to collect traditional legends from that specific island, and compile these knowledges into booklets for Marshallese Language Arts curriculum. These legends are analyzed for their linkages to environmental issues and cultural values, and are submitted through the Ministry of Education's Curriculum division to be distributed to teachers as well as to Council of Irooj for cultural approval. The total costing for one atoll and booklet was at US\$50,000..

Another example from the same organization is the Majuro kiosks project. The Historic Preservation Office has mapped legendary landmark sites on Majuro atoll. These sites are locations where significant and important Marshallese legends took place. Partnering with Jo-Jikum, a small pilot project is underway to create kiosks that would mark four of the seven of these legendary landmarks to increase public awareness of these legends and promote cultural knowledge. The kiosks are painted depictions of each of the legends by youth artists, in an effort to connect youth to these cultural knowledges as well. As this project nears completion, it provides a possible opportunity to attract or leverage for funding for noneconomic loss and damage – marking and preserving significant sites of Marshallese legends. The total costing for this project was at US\$10,000.

Another recommendation which will be necessary for addressing noneconomic losses and damages would be the development of mental health institutions which specialize in culturally relevant forms of mental health support. This will be necessary to help community members process the ongoing impacts of losses tied to land and identity.

While these are smaller scale projects, they are examples of possible uses of funding for non-economic losses and damages.