

Confronting the Irreplaceable Priority Actions for Responding to NELs

Credit: Bianca Vitale



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Our loved ones who have passed away, when we bury them, we say ‘sili vakarua’ (‘bath twice’) because one is the bath before they are put in the coffin, and they bath again after they are buried as the waves come in and enter the new burial site. This is just traumatizing for us...

– Resident of Togoru Settlement, Fiji



WIM ExCom



Expert Group on
Non-economic
losses

Source: This brief builds on the *Non-economic losses: Featuring loss of territory and habitability, ecosystem services and biodiversity, and cultural heritage*. Technical paper. UNFCCC, 2024.

Climate change is not an abstract threat – it is a lived and accumulating trauma for communities around the world. Extreme weather events and slow-onset processes are destroying homes and livelihoods, degrading ecosystems, severing relationships between people and nature, and obliterating cultural and natural heritage. From ancestral burial grounds and sacred sites to forests, glaciers, and coastal lands, climate impacts are eroding the cultural and ecological foundations that shape identity, knowledge, well-being, and resilience.

These are **non-economic losses** (NELs): profound, sometimes irreversible harms that are difficult to capture in monetary terms but that fundamentally affect people’s lives, their histories, and their futures.

Background

Established in 2013, the Executive Committee of the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage associated with Climate Change Impacts (WIM ExCom) guides the implementation of the Mechanism’s functions: enhancing knowledge, coordination, action and support to address loss and damage associated with climate change impacts in developing countries that are particularly vulnerable. Through the establishment of thematic expert groups, a task force and a technical expert group, the WIM ExCom mobilizes a diverse range of technical expertise and resources.

The expert group on NELs was established at COP 25/CMA 2 in 2019 and implements WIM ExCom’s work related to NELs through its plan of action, under which the technical paper was prepared. For more information on the expert group on non-economic losses, please refer to the websites through the QR codes.

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Loss of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services

Credit: Marcus Nield

Climate change is reshaping ecosystems, altering their composition, structure, and function. As biodiversity declines and ecosystems degrade, essential services such as food and freshwater provision, climate regulation, hazard mitigation, soil formation, and cultural meaning can become eroded.

Climate Change

Loss of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services

Food and water security

Reduction of coral reefs' protective function after storm damage

Livelihoods

Declining fish stocks due to eutrophication related to ocean warming

Health and well-being

Mental health issues due to loss of income after climate change induced crop failure

Habitability

Displacement due to sea level rise and salt water intrusion

Opportunities

Pastoralism becoming unviable because of droughts

Dignity

Forced climate migration and life in informal settlements

Identity

Loss of cultural heritage; Loss of shade-providing trees of cultural significance in central village places due to changing weather patterns

Cultural Heritage

Heritage sites, knowledge, and practices, including skills and resilience are diminished, damaged, or lost

Socio-ecological system



Credit: Marcus Nield

Example:

In **Vanuatu**, many coastal and mountainous regions have become uninhabitable as a consequence of climate-induced degradation of environmental resources, such as food, fresh water, or materials such as timber, and ecosystems not being able to sustain human lives. The loss of livelihoods has often forced Indigenous communities to leave ancestral land. Women in particular are affected as they rely on the coral, sea grass and mangrove ecosystems for their livelihoods, and for spiritual, customary and social protection purposes.

Loss of Territory and Habitability

Credit: Bianca Vitale

Sea-level rise, desertification, glacial retreat, coastal erosion, and related hazards are driving the loss of land, both physically and in its ability to sustain life.

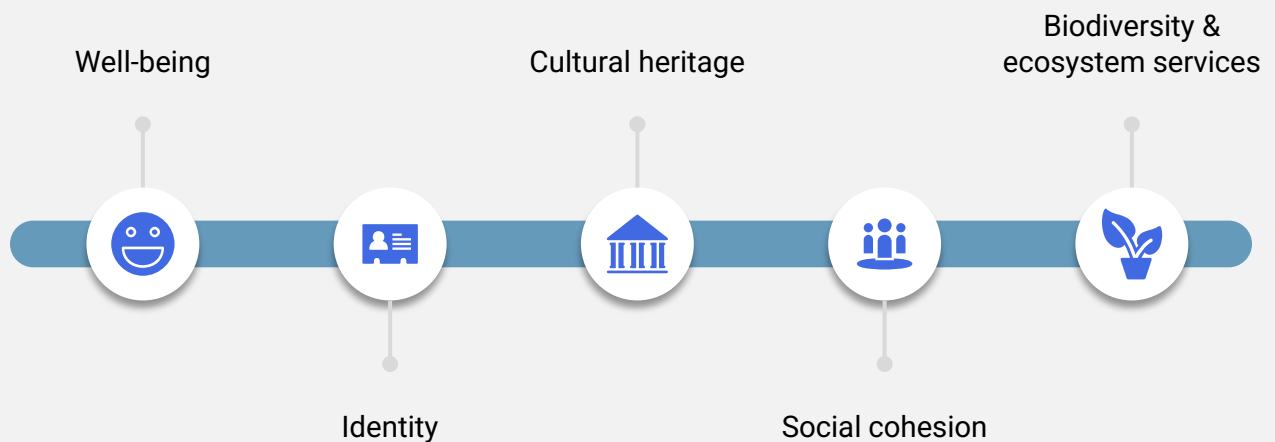
Loss of territory

Loss of territory refers to the disappearance of physical land from the jurisdiction and use of communities.

Loss of habitability

Loss of habitability concerns land that remains but is less able to reliably support human life.

These forms of loss affect:



Credit: Bianca Vitale

Example:

In **Bangladesh**, rising tides, saline intrusion, and riverbank erosion have washed away homes and fields in some areas, contributing to landlessness, food insecurity, psychological distress, and the erosion of identity and belonging.

Loss of Cultural Heritage

The erosion of cultural heritage in all its forms – from archaeological sites and architectural marvels to historic cities, cultural landscapes, artifacts, living heritage elements, and underwater heritage – is resulting in the loss of distinctive forms as well as accumulated knowledge, skills, livelihoods, governance systems, innovation, food and water security, and resilience.



Credit: Artan Jama

These losses often overlap and have impacts at various scales, from local communities to the global level, depending on the value of the heritage



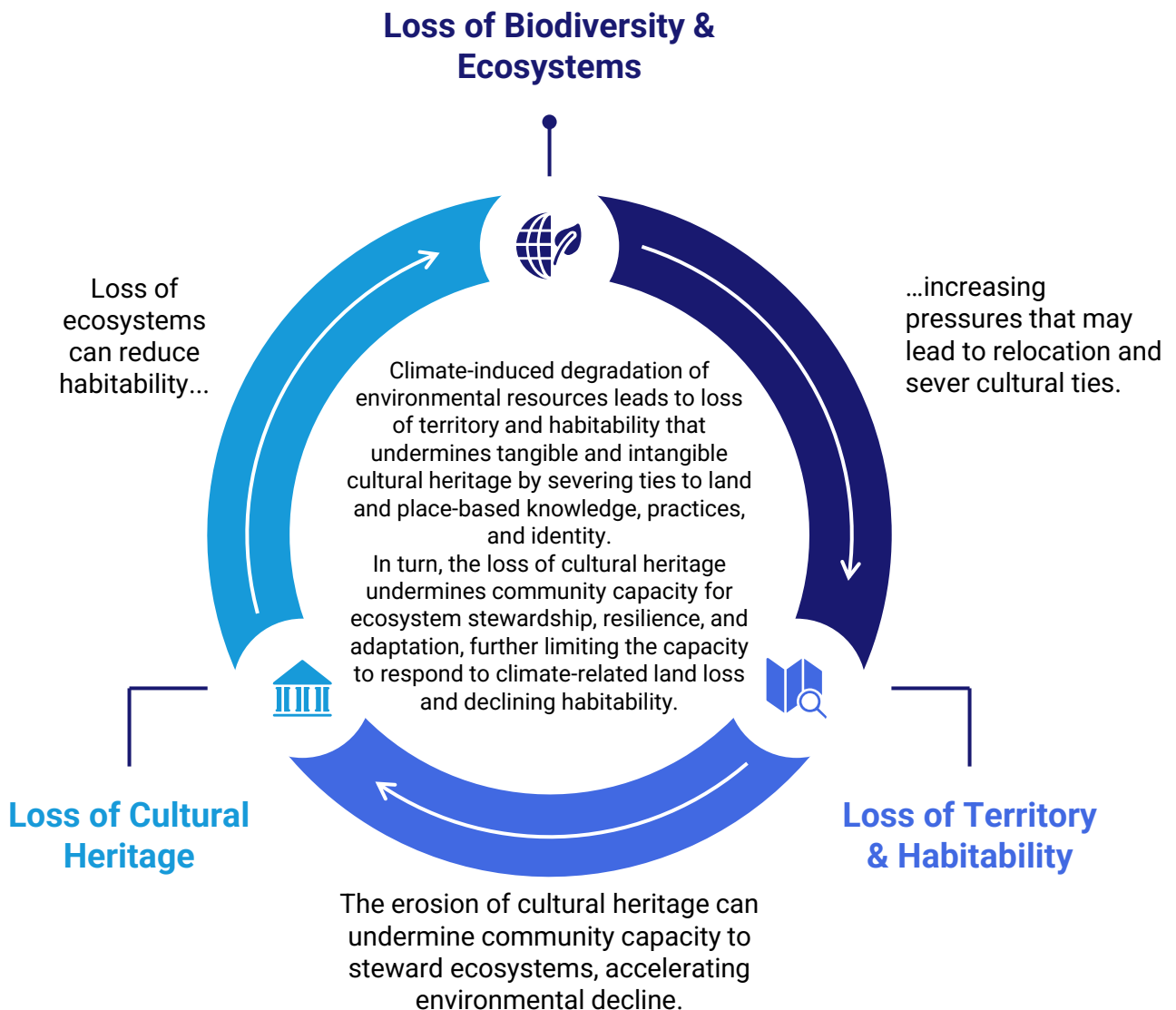
Credit: Faith Kathambi Mutegi

Example:

In **Cameroon**, climate impacts threaten sacred sites along the Lobé River and the Nguon festival, ritual events whose loss could pose risks to community resilience, traditional governance, and the cultural fabric that binds communities across generations.

Interlinkages and Cascading Impacts

NELs rarely occur in isolation.



These intertwined losses compound harm and deepen inequalities across generations.

Effective responses must therefore be integrated, locally led, rights-based, coherent across sectors and scales, and attuned to the complex ways climate change disrupts lives, landscapes, and legacies.

NELs are not peripheral. Recognizing and supporting responses to these losses is important for building resilience, advancing equity, and securing sustainable futures.

Eight Priority Actions for Addressing NELs

1

Recognize that biodiversity and ecosystem services, territory and habitability, and cultural heritage are increasingly exposed to climate impacts while also serving as foundations of resilience

- Integrate these dimensions into national, subnational, and local adaptation plans, disaster risk reduction strategies, and other policy areas and relevant legislation to ensure NELs are fully considered.
- Ensure assessments reflect their ecological, social, and cultural significance, recognizing both their exposure to climate impacts and their critical role in supporting resilience.

2

Strengthen coordination across sectors and scales

- Improve coordination across institutions, levels of government, and sectors to support responses to address interconnected losses.
- Build multi-stakeholder partnerships involving governments, international agencies, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and technical experts.

3

Ensure responses are locally led and community-centred

- Prioritize approaches grounded in local values, knowledge systems, and lived realities.
- Direct finance and support toward groups facing barriers to access, including women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, and those without formal land tenure.

4

Invest in nature- and ecosystem-based solutions

- Scale up culturally grounded, science-based initiatives that restore ecosystems, sustain biodiversity, and support habitability to help avert and minimize NELs.
- Embed these solutions in national policies and community-led planning processes.

Eight Priority Actions for Addressing NELs

5

Support context-dependent, rights-based approaches to planned relocation

- As a last resort where relocation is identified as necessary, ensure processes are community-driven, rights-based, and supported by sustained finance.
- Draw on emerging frameworks, such as Fiji's national framework for planned relocation, that integrate cultural, social, environmental, and technical considerations.

6

Safeguard and mobilize cultural heritage as part of climate action

- Strengthen laws, governance arrangements, and management systems that protect tangible and intangible cultural heritage, recognizing that safeguarding cultural heritage is itself a component of climate action.
- Support initiatives that inventory, document, safeguard, and transmit all forms of cultural heritage.

7

Expand monitoring, data, and diverse knowledge systems

- Invest in ecosystem baselines, cultural heritage registries, and community-defined indicators relevant to NELs, with continuous monitoring to identify emerging impacts.
- Integrate scientific assessments with Indigenous knowledge systems and other place-based knowledge systems.

8

Share knowledge and build capacities to understand and respond to NELs

- Strengthen capacities at all levels to assess, anticipate, and respond to NELs, including awareness raising that reflects local perspectives recognizing all types of cultural heritage.
- Support communities and institutions to integrate diverse knowledge systems and enhance preparedness, resilience, and cultural continuity.