Safeguarding South Pacific Islanders' Cultural Heritage: Another Tool to Strengthen Climate Resilience?

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Climate change impacts such as sea level rise and extreme weather events are threatening the lives, livelihoods, and cultures of millions worldwide. Low-lying Island States, which are affected by rising seas to such an extent that they even face the complete disappearance of their islands, are particularly vulnerable to climate change. In the South Pacific, which represents a culturally rich and diverse region, the change in weather patterns poses a particularly high threat to Islanders' cultural heritage. The living heritage, or intangible cultural heritage (ICH), of South Pacific Islanders ranges from sand drawings (*sandroing*) in Vanuatu, to traditional body tattoos (*pe'a*) in Samoa, up to action songs (*faatele*) in Tuvalu, among many others. All of these long-standing cultural traditions are

> *intrinsically linked to the people who created [them] and/or continue practicing [them] because of the links with the communities and its intergenerational transmission. For its creators and holders, ICH is a matter of identity and maintenance of their own unique personality, which links it to the preservation and upholding of human dignity more generally (see the published Report on page 11).*

As ICH is often associated with a specific ecosystem and, therefore, place-based, it is in danger of getting lost if climate change impacts negatively affect the environment. Thus, the safeguarding of South Pacific Islanders' ICH in the climate emergency is not only crucial to prevent the loss of culture, but also to protect the Islanders' identity and the cultural diversity in the region.

To draw attention to this issue of global concern, recent research on 'Intangible Cultural Heritage within the Laws and Policies of South Pacific Small Island States in the Climate Crisis: Towards a More Resilient and Inclusive Approach' analysed whether the safeguarding of ICH can contribute towards a more resilient and inclusive climate change approach. It did so by examining the laws and policies of eight South Pacific Island States, namely Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu (and including human rights, cultural heritage, intellectual property (IP), environmental, climate change, and disaster risk reduction (DRR) and disaster risk management (DRM) laws and policies).

The research, which has just been published as a Report, found that the safeguarding of ICH in the climate emergency can contribute to inclusive mitigation and adaptation measures, and eventually to resilience. For example, climate initiatives that are driven by ICH, such as traditional boat and vessel building or low-impact agricultural techniques, among others, tend to mobilise communities more effectively. An interview, conducted as part of the research, states

> *some heritage is passed on through music, songs, drama, through traditional dances that explain what actually happened before [what is that community's history]. And you cannot talk about resilience in*

> *a community without understanding that; [this will have an] impact on how they respond to certain events (see the published Report on page 14).*

The Integrated Environment and Natural Resources Policy 2021-2023 in Tuvalu, which refers to the documentation of traditional knowledge such as weather prediction or navigation skills to provide access to information without discrimination, is an example of safeguarding ICH in environmental policies. Other South Pacific Island States, such as Papua New Guinea, include traditional knowledge in data management to evaluate, report, and enhance implementation and future measures in the context of adaptive governance. Incorporating ICH in mitigation and adaptation measures tend, therefore, not only to be more successful, but they also uphold the cultural practices themselves, leading to strong traditional institutions and community ties.

The research further identified good practices in the eight Pacific Island States, for example, some of the analysed Constitutions highlight the unique cultures of their citizens and mention cultural rights in policy documents. In Fiji, the adopted Displacement Guidelines include a reference to cultural rights, which goes even beyond the rights mentioned in the Fijian Bill of Rights of the Constitution. Another good practice is the implementation of the regional Model Law for Traditional Knowledge and Expressions of Culture in Vanuatu, which added, for example, the expansion of the definition of traditional knowledge. In the Solomon Islands, a representative of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism is foreseen as a co-opted member of the National Disaster Council, and the Ward and Village Disaster Risk Committees are foreseen to be involved in local community groups and NGOs. At the same time, the lack of sufficient protection of South Pacific Islanders' rights and ICH in climate-induced cross-border displacement processes, as well as the limited possibility to allege a violation of the right to participate in cultural life before a treaty body, a supra-national human rights court, or a domestic court, were identified as existing protection gaps.

To ensure the safeguarding of ICH and its integration in relevant laws and policies moving forward, the Report recommends to further raise awareness of the importance of ICH beyond community levels, up to a domestic, regional, and international level, and including all relevant stakeholders especially involved in climate action. For example, more studies and concrete action are needed to document, with consent of the communities, cultural practices that are used to mitigate and adapt to climate change. From a climate resilience perspective, measures should be taken to reinforce, elevate, and boost ICH practices such as traditional weather warning systems, as they are beneficial for everyone, especially if there is no access to technology in more remote areas. The need to increase communication and cooperation between all relevant sectors is another recommendation clearly set out in the Report, among many others. Overall, these recommendations are aimed to draw attention to the great potential cultural heritage has as a tool for resilience. As climate action can benefit from ICH, it is important to better integrate it in laws and policies that are directly relevant to climate change and disasters.

It is hoped that the research findings will be used to inform practice in other regions, and that valuable lessons can be learned from the ways South Pacific Islanders' laws and policies have integrated heritage thus far. Furthermore, it is anticipated that the research outcomes will rally greater support for the preservation of the ICH of South Pacific Islanders. These communities often find themselves at the forefront of the climate crisis, necessitating urgent global action.

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