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GA 3: Social, Cultural and Humanitarian (SOCHUM)

Research Report

TOPIC 3: Discussing the socio-cultural issues resulting from rising sea levels.



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Introduction:

As the earth faces challenges like the escalating impacts of climate change, one of the most pressing concerns is the rise in global sea levels. While the physical consequences of this crisis are often at the forefront of discussions, the socio-cultural implications are closely tied to this and are quite profound as well. These issues extend beyond the immediate threats of flooding and coastal erosion, penetrating deep into the fabric of human societies and cultures.

Rising sea levels are not just about water rising above land, this generates a variety of socio-cultural issues. From bustling coastal cities to remote island communities, the socio-cultural landscape is being reshaped by this global environmental shift. This poses a threat to cultural heritage and identity, especially in cases of isolated communities, livelihoods and economic activities and of course displacement of communities due to the loss of land and/or livelihood.

By examining these and other such issues, we can better understand the social dimension of sea level rise and the urgent need for comprehensive, culturally sensitive solutions to address this global challenge. The mitigating of socio-cultural problems caused by sea level rising is an international issue of urgency.

Definition of Key Terms:

(terms from previous reports may apply to this case as well)

Relative sea-level rise (RSL)- The change in the difference in elevation between the land and the sea surface at a specific time and location.

Global mean sea level (GMSL)- The average height of the ocean surface worldwide, measured from the centre of the Earth.

Coastal displacement- Forced movement of individuals or communities due to climate change impacts.

Planned relocation- Organized movement of communities away from high-risk coastal areas.

Vulnerability- The susceptibility of individuals, communities, or ecosystems to negative impacts arising from environmental, social, or economic stressors.

Displacement- The enforced departure of people from their homes, typically because of war, persecution, or natural disaster.

Heritage- Valued objects and qualities such as cultural traditions, unspoiled countryside, and historic buildings that have been passed down from previous generations.

Culture- The customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group.

Forced migration- The movement of people from one place to another, especially in large numbers, due to the impacts of sea level rise on coastal areas.

Thermal expansion- The increase in ocean volume due to warming water, contributing to sea-level rise.

Glaciers- a large, persistent body of dense ice that forms on land from the accumulation and compaction of snow over many years, usually on mountains.

Background Information

Sea levels have fluctuated throughout Earth's history, but the current rate of rise is unprecedented. The primary cause of said modern sea level rise is human-induced climate change, resulting from increased greenhouse gas emissions as is common knowledge in today's world. The warming of the planet caused by this leads to the accelerated melting of

ice sheets and in Greenland and Antarctica, the thermal expansion of ocean water and the melting of glaciers. While the exact rate of future sea level rise is uncertain, it is clear that the trend will continue and likely accelerate. One of the more pressing concerns as a result of this accelerated rise in ocean levels, is the displacement of coastal communities. Certain studies even suggest that close to 410 million people¹ will be challenged by this circumstance, The IPCC (2014) projected that the average sea level rise worldwide would be between 0.44m and 0.74m by 2100².

This situation can be viewed from two perspectives, the internal and external impacts. The internal struggles lie in the large-scale migration of individuals which has the potential to break community bonds, erode cultural customs, and raise demand on inland communities and social services. The loss of ancestral lands and cultural places threatens the very identity of many coastal communities, particularly indigenous groups with strong attachments to their environs. The external struggles lie in the equally important economic consequences. Rising sea levels can result in the loss of livelihoods in industries such as fishing, agriculture and tourism. The expenditures on coastal protection and infrastructure repairs put a further burden on local economies. These economic constraints can worsen existing social imbalances since vulnerable communities sometimes have fewer resources to adjust or migrate.

Comprehensive adaptation strategies must consider not only physical protection measures but also the preservation of cultural heritage, support for mental health, and equitable solutions for vulnerable populations. The challenge lies in developing approaches that balance the need for physical safety with the preservation of community identity and well-being in the face of this global environmental shift.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

Malta

An advocate for small state issues and oceanic sustainability within the UN framework, Malta has played a serious role in raising awareness about maritime and coastal vulnerabilities. In 2017, Malta hosted the Our Ocean Conference, emphasizing the need for global action on ocean conservation and climate change³

¹ Masterson, Victoria, Stephen Hall, and Madeleine North. "Sea Level Rise: Everything You Need to Know." World Economic Forum, September 20, 2024.

<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/09/rising-sea-levels-global-threat/>

² Burdett, Matt. "Societal Impacts of Climate Change: Sea Level Rise." GeographyCaseStudy.com, April 10, 2018. <https://geographycasestudy.com/societal-impacts-of-climate-change-sea-level-rise/>.

³ European Commission - European Commission. "Our Ocean 2017 Conference: Malta, 5-6 October," n.d. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/AGENDA_17_3189.

Pacific Island Nations

Nations like Tuvalu, Kiribati, and the Marshall Islands face existential threats due to rising sea levels. They are prominent voices for urgent global action on climate change. The Marshall Islands, for instance, is experiencing saltwater intrusion into its freshwater supplies due to sea-level rise⁴

Caribbean Nations

Countries like Barbados and the Bahamas are experiencing increased coastal erosion, economic losses in tourism, and threats to cultural heritage. They actively participate in climate justice discussions.

Bangladesh

As a low-lying nation, Bangladesh is highly vulnerable to sea-level rise, with up to 32 million people potentially affected by 2100. The country plays a key role in advocating for adaptation funding and global action.⁵

Netherlands

Renowned for its advanced flood management and coastal defence systems, the Netherlands serves as a leader in innovative solutions for mitigating sea-level rise. The country's Delta Program is an elaborate system of dams, sluice gates, storm surge barriers, etc designed for the protection and conservation of the state.⁶

G20 Countries

Includes major emitters like the USA, China, and India whose actions significantly influence global warming and sea-level rise. They also include nations at risk, such as Indonesia, which is relocating its capital due to rising seas.

⁴ Burkett, Maxine. "Understanding the Effect of Climate Change on the Migration of Marshallese Islanders – Pacific Island Climate Adaptation Science Center," n.d.

<https://pi-casc.soest.hawaii.edu/research/research-projects/climate-effect-on-marshallese-migration/>.

⁵ Shariot-Ullah, Md. "Sea-Level Rise and Sustainable Shore Protection Strategies in the Low-Lying Delta: A Case Study of Bangladesh." *Regional Studies in Marine Science* 71 (April 1, 2024): 103424. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rsma.2024.103424>.

⁶ Waterstaat, Ministerie van Infrastructuur en. "Home - Delta Programme." english.deltaprogramma.nl, May 14, 2013. <https://english.deltaprogramma.nl/>.

Arctic Nations

Countries like Russia, Canada, Greenland(Denmark) and Norway are critical because of the Arctic's accelerated ice melt, which contributes to global sea-level rise. Indigenous groups from these regions highlight socio-cultural impacts. Due to the isolation and scarce dispersal of such communities, the cultures are more vulnerable.

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)⁷: It facilitates global climate negotiations, including agreements like the Paris Accord, which directly address mitigation and adaptation strategies for sea-level rise. The UNFCCC also recognises the importance of non-economic losses, including cultural heritage, identity, and traditional knowledge systems, which are particularly vulnerable to sea-level rise impacts.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC): It provides authoritative scientific assessments on climate impacts, including detailed analysis of sea-level rise and its socio-cultural consequences. Their reports project sea level rise of up to 2 m by 2100, highlighting significant risks to regional geography and human societies⁸. The IPCC emphasizes that sea-level rise could directly physical and mental health, food security, and overall well-being of coastal communities.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)⁹: UNESCO's role in protecting cultural heritage sites and promoting sustainable management of coastal ecosystems. Their work is particularly relevant given the threat to tangible and intangible cultural heritage in coastal areas affected by rising seas. They also provide the Global Sea Level Observing System (GLOSS) that measures global sea levels as part of the Global Ocean Observing System.

Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS)¹⁰: AOSIS represents the interests of small island nations most vulnerable to sea-level rise. These nations, including Pacific Island countries,

⁷ Unfccc.int. "Introduction to Science in the UNFCCC," 2024.

<https://unfccc.int/topics/science/the-big-picture/introduction-science?>

⁸ IPCC. "Chapter 4: Sea Level Rise and Implications for Low-Lying Islands, Coasts and Communities — Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate." Ipcc.ch. IPCC, 2019. <https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/chapter/chapter-4-sea-level-rise-and-implications-for-low-lying-islands-coast-s-and-communities/>.

⁹ Unesco.org. "The Global Sea Level Observing System (GLOSS)," 2023. <https://www.ioc.unesco.org/en/global-sea-level-observing-system>.

¹⁰ Aosis.org. "AOSIS Leaders Declaration on Sea Level Rise and Statehood – AOSIS," 2024. <https://www.aosis.org/aosis-leaders-declaration-on-sea-level-rise-and-statehood/>.

face existential threats due to rising seas and are prominent voices for urgent global action on climate change.

Relevant UN Resolutions

A/RES/70/1(2015): "Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development"¹¹

This introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a framework for global action to address environmental, economic, and social challenges. This agenda linked climate action (Goal 13) with sustainable cities and communities (Goal 11), highlighting the socio-cultural vulnerabilities of populations facing sea-level rise. The rising seas threaten the cultural heritage, homes, and identities of communities, especially in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and low-lying coastal areas.

It mobilized global attention to the cultural losses associated with climate change. It inspired initiatives to document and safeguard at-risk heritage, such as UNESCO's efforts to map vulnerable cultural sites.

A/RES/71/312 (2017): "Our Ocean, Our Future: Call for Action"¹²

During the UN Ocean Conference, this resolution focused on the sustainable use and conservation of oceans while addressing the socio-cultural effects of rising seas. It highlighted how flooding and coastal erosion threaten the livelihoods, traditions, and cultural heritage of coastal and island communities. The resolution called for international cooperation in protecting endangered heritage and advocated for financial and technical support to vulnerable nations.

Its effectiveness has been constrained by a lack of binding commitments and funding for implementation. Still, the resolution remains a cornerstone in advocating for the preservation of cultural heritage linked to marine ecosystems, setting the stage for future agreements.

¹¹ "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." *United Nations Digital Library Systems*, October 21, 2015.

https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_1_E.pdf.

¹² "Our Ocean, Our Future: Call for Action." *United Nations Library Systems*, July 14, 2017. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n17/207/56/pdf/n1720756.pdf>.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

The Maldives' Relocation Project (2012-Present)¹³

The Maldives' "Vilufushi" **relocation project** aimed to move populations from small, at-risk islands to larger, safer islands or newly built communities. The project included efforts to **safeguard cultural practices**, such as **maintaining traditional livelihoods** (fishing, handicrafts) and preserving community-oriented spaces. The Maldives also received assistance from the **Asian Development Bank (ADB)** to relocate affected populations in a way that integrated their cultural and social structures. The project highlighted the difficulty of preserving cultural identity when large-scale displacement becomes necessary. Moreover, the financial and logistical challenges of relocating entire communities have limited the success of such efforts.

UNESCO's World Heritage and Climate Change Initiative (2007)

This initiative aimed to assess and address the risks faced by cultural and natural heritage sites that are vulnerable to climate impacts, including rising sea levels. UNESCO created the **World Heritage Sites at Risk** list, which included several coastal and island sites such as Venice (Italy), the Maldives, and the Galápagos Islands, all of which are threatened by rising seas and extreme weather events. The initiative successfully raised awareness about the vulnerability of cultural heritage to climate change and catalysed cooperation between international organizations and local governments.

Kiribati's "Migration with Dignity" Strategy (2008)¹⁴

The government introduced its "**Migration with Dignity**" strategy to address the socio-cultural impacts of climate change and displacement. The strategy aimed to allow the citizens of Kiribati to migrate to other countries (such as New Zealand and Australia) without losing their cultural identity. This plan included **maintaining cultural connections**, such as language and traditions, even after migration. It also focused on educating the population about the need for **relocation**, while emphasizing the importance of preserving cultural values. This strategy brought international attention to Kiribati's model has been influential in raising awareness of the socio-cultural dimensions of sea-level rise. However, it has faced significant challenges, such as resistance from potential host countries.

¹³ Gussmann, Geronimo, and Jochen Hinkel. "What Drives Relocation Policies in the Maldives?" *Climatic Change* 163, no. 2 (November 2020): 931–51. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-020-02919-8>.

¹⁴ E McNamara, Karen . "Cross-Border Migration with Dignity in Kiribati," June 2015. <https://espace.library.uq.edu.au>

Possible solutions:

Cultural Landscape Mapping and Protection:

A process of identifying, documenting, and preserving culturally significant landscapes threatened by climate change. It involves local communities in mapping their heritage and developing protection strategies

Community-Based Climate Adaptation:

An approach that involves local communities in developing and implementing adaptation strategies based on their knowledge, priorities, and capacities. It addresses local development concerns while building climate resilience

Ecological Restoration and Community Resilience Building:

A holistic approach that combines ecosystem restoration with community engagement to enhance both ecological and social resilience. It involves local participation in restoring degraded landscapes and ecosystems

Establishing Climate-Resilient Cultural Villages:

Creating or adapting existing settlements to withstand climate impacts while preserving cultural heritage. This involves integrating traditional knowledge with modern resilience techniques in urban planning and architecture

Migration with Dignity and Cultural Integration Programs:

Initiatives designed to support communities forced to relocate due to climate change, ensuring their cultural heritage and identity are preserved during and after migration. These programs facilitate integration while maintaining cultural connections

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