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ECOSOC 1: High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF)

# Research Report

Topic 1: Debating the rising water levels in areas with indigenous populations and overpopulation.



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## Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Definition of Key Terms	3
Background Information	3
Major Countries and Organisations Involved	5
Relevant UN Resolutions	6
Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue	7
Bibliography	8

## Introduction

The rising water levels, resulting from climate change, pose an existential threat to many coastal and low-lying regions worldwide. Among the most vulnerable populations to these environmental changes are indigenous communities, whose cultural, social, and economic lives are intricately tied to the land and natural resources they have inhabited for centuries. These communities face the dual challenge of losing their traditional territories and ways of life. In many cases, indigenous peoples have already experienced the consequences of environmental degradation and it represents an existential threat to their survival and heritage. The situation is further compounded in areas already burdened by overpopulation, where rapid urbanization, resource depletion, and socio-economic challenges exacerbate the effects of rising sea levels. Rapid urbanisation and population growth intensify the strain on ecosystems, infrastructure, and resources, making it even more difficult for communities to adapt to environmental changes. As more people move to already vulnerable areas, the risks of flooding, displacement, and loss of livelihood increase, further exacerbating the challenges faced by indigenous populations<sup>1</sup>. The United Nations plays a critical role in addressing the issue of rising water levels in regions with indigenous populations, particularly through its frameworks for climate action and human rights. By providing a platform for dialogue and action, the UN encourages international cooperation and ensures that indigenous voices are central in addressing the challenges posed by rising water levels.

## Definition of key terms

**Rising sea level:** A change to the height of sea level, both globally and locally (relative sea-level change) at seasonal, annual, or longer time scales. It is most importantly due to global warming, caused by human activities.

**Global warming (or climate change):** The phenomenon of increasing average air temperatures near Earth's surface over the past one to two centuries, it happens mostly in the troposphere, the lowest level of the atmosphere, which extends from Earth's surface up to a height of 6–11 miles.

**Coastal erosion:** The process by which local sea levels rise, strong wave action, and coastal flooding wear down or carry away rocks, soils, and/or sands along the coast.

**Urbanisation:** The process by which large numbers of people become permanently concentrated in relatively small areas, forming cities.

1: Indigenous Peoples are distinct social and cultural groups that share collective ancestral ties to the lands and natural resources where they live, occupy or from which they have been displaced.

## Background Information

In our current world, the rising water levels poses a significant threat for especially the indigenous populations. To begin with, global climate change causes ice caps in places such as but not limited to, the north pole, to melt. As a result, sea waters begin to expand, leading to a consistent rise in sea levels. For example, this can be seen in the IPCC reports<sup>2</sup> where an average global sea level rise of 3.7 mm per year since 2006. This endangers low-lying ancestral lands which disrupts the livelihood and cultural preservation of that area.

Furthermore, the rise in sea levels causes indigenous populations to face disproportionate impacts from the environmental changes. As many of these populations rely on the ecosystem for their survival, whether it is farming, fishing or cultural practices, the rising sea level causes disruptions of the preservation for these activities. In this case, the Yupik people in Alaska experience negative externalities due to their eroding coastlines and disappearing ice. Due to the reliance on the environment and their limited access to resources, these communities are the first to face the struggles of the rising sea levels as it threatens their homes and traditions.

In addition to these problems, overpopulation has become an even more pressing issue due to its risk of environmental degradation. To explain, the increased population growth forces urban expansion into flood-prone areas. The Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta, for example, faces recurring floods due to the high population density. In this case, the overcrowding amplifies the exposure to environmental risks, worsening the impact on marginalized groups.

Lastly, when combining both the rising water levels and overpopulation, it creates a dual pressure on the indigenous communities. These communities face environmental degradation and social marginalisation simultaneously, leading to resource struggles and heritage loss. In Tuvalu, the rising seas threaten to submerge their ancestral lands, and migration options for them are limited. To combat these struggles, comprehensive solutions, addressing environmental and social dimensions to protect these vulnerable populations are needed to be set in place.

## Major countries and organisations involved

### United States of America:

- Sea level along the U.S. coastline is expected to rise, on average, 10 - 12 inches 0.25 - 0.5 meters in the next 30 years, which will be as much as the rise measured over the last 100 years (1920 - 2020).
- Alaska's indigenous communities, including the Iñupiat and Yupik peoples, are experiencing rapid coastal erosion and the thawing of permafrost due to warming temperatures and rising sea levels. This represents a threat for their traditional way of living including subsistence hunting and fishing.

<sup>2</sup>: The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate change <https://www.ipcc.ch/2019/09/25/srocc-press-release/>

**Philippines:**

- A study found that sea levels in the Philippine Sea rose from 1993 to 2015 at a rate of 5 to 7 millimeters per year, surpassing the global average of 2.8 to 3.6 millimeters. This is a immense threat for the country, as many coastal and island communities live there.
- This issue results in typhoons, coastal flooding and loss of agricultural land.

**India:**

- India is the most populated country in the world and is among the nations facing the highest threat from sea level rise with around 1.4 billion people living on Indian Coastlines who are experiencing sea-level rise, erosion, and natural disasters such as tropical storms.
- Rising sea levels pose a significant risk to critical infrastructure along India's coastline, impacting ports, airports, power stations, and roadways. Any damage or disruption to this infrastructure may lead to economic losses, impede development, and adversely affect coastal industries, including tourism and shipping.

**UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples):**

- The UNDRIP<sup>3</sup> was adopted by the UN General Assembly, this declaration protects the rights of Indigenous peoples, including their right to self-determination and their rights to lands and resources, which are critical in the context of displacement due to rising sea levels.

**Pacific Islands Forum (PIF):**

- The PIF<sup>4</sup> is a regional organisation that represents 18 Pacific countries and territories, including several island nations that are at the frontline of climate change impacts, such as rising sea levels. It has been fundamental in raising awareness about climate.

**International Organisation for Migration (IOM):**

- The IOM works on migration-related issues, particularly in the context of climate-induced displacement. Rising sea levels are expected to drive significant migration, including the displacement of Indigenous communities, and the IOM plays a role in supporting governments and affected communities with resettlement and adaptation strategies.

<sup>3</sup>: [UNDRIP E\\_web.pdf](#)

<sup>4</sup>: [The Pacific Islands Forum | Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat](#)

## Relevant UN Resolutions

In the past, the UN has adopted several resolutions to address the challenges posed by climate change, rising water levels and their impacts on the indigenous populations. Such resolutions include:

- 1. Human Rights and Climate Change (Resolution 35/20, July 2017)**
  - a. *Encourages* Member States to integrate human rights into climate change policies, ensuring protection for individuals displaced across borders due to the adverse effects on climate change.
  - b. *Requests* the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights<sup>5</sup> (OHCHR) to provide comprehensive reports on human rights protection gaps arising from climate-induced displacement.
- 2. Human Rights and Indigenous Peoples (October 2021)**
  - a. *Affirms* the critical role of indigenous peoples in addressing climate change and preserving biodiversity, calling for their meaningful participation in decision-making processes.
  - b. *Condemns* acts of repression against human rights defenders within indigenous communities and urges Member States to ensure their protection and safety.
- 3. The Human Rights to a Clean, Healthy, and Sustainable Environment (July 2022)**
  - a. *Recognises* the universal right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment and calls upon Member States to take effective measures to fulfill this right for all individuals.
  - b. *Stresses* the importance of international cooperation in addressing environmental challenges that threaten this fundamental human right.
- 4. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)**
  - a. *Reaffirms* the rights of indigenous peoples to maintain and strengthen their spiritual connection with their traditionally owned lands, territories, and waters.
  - b. *Urges* Member States to implement legislative and administrative measures to achieve the ends of the Declaration, ensuring full recognition of indigenous peoples' rights.

<sup>5</sup>: The mission of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is to work for the protection of all human rights for all people; to help empower people to realize their rights; and to assist those responsible for upholding such rights in ensuring that they are implemented.

## Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

### **1. Indigenous-Led Climate Change Adaptation Programs:**

- a. The Climate Change and Health Adaptation Program (CCHAP) is a program that funds community-designed projects that are aimed at building capacity for climate change adaptation, focusing on health impacts. It also supports the indigenous communities in developing strategies to mitigate climate related health risks<sup>6</sup>.

### **2. Development of Indigenous Climate Adaption Toolkits:**

- a. The Indigenous Climate Change Adaptation Planning Toolkit was developed to support indigenous communities in identifying tools, resources, and best practices for climate adaptation. It helps address risks such as loss of winter roads, wildfires, inland flooding, and sea-level rise.

### **3. International Collaboration and Funding:**

- a. The Tribal Climate Resilience and Adaptation Funding, offered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), is a funding guide providing information on grants and programs to assist tribes in addressing climate change across various sectors.

### **4. Integration of Traditional Knowledge in Climate Strategies:**

- a. The indigenous communities are increasingly recognised for their innovative health-related climate change adaptation work which utilises their traditional knowledge and novel approaches to address climate impacts.

### **5. Global Initiatives for Flood Risk Management:**

- a. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has been working to reduce the impacts of flooding worldwide by promoting flood resilience, building capacity, and gathering data to inform policy making.

<sup>6</sup>: The climate related health risks can be respiratory and cardiovascular disease, injuries and premature deaths related to extreme weather events, changes in the prevalence and geographical distribution of food- and water-borne illnesses and other infectious diseases, and threats to mental health.

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