RISING TIDES, SHRINKING COASTS, AND SINKING RIGHTS:

Climate Crisis and the Struggles of Fisher Peoples

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Systemic Change Now: No to Climate Change!

The climate crisis has brought severe damage to frontline communities who depend on nature for their lives and livelihoods. Food producers who feed the world are facing immense challenges due to the climate crisis, and their living conditions are deteriorating day by day, resulting in violations of their basic human rights.

According to the ILO, fisher peoples are among those engaged in one of the most dangerous occupations in the world and are being pushed deeper into poverty, hunger and vulnerability due to the climate crisis. Frequent natural calamities such as hurricanes, typhoons, gales, tsunamis, and storms, along with changing sea waves and water current patterns not only devastate their lives and livelihoods, but also damage ecosystems and coastal areas.

The current trend of global warming has intensified the unaddressed climate crisis, severely impacting fishing communities. Sea-level rise and sea erosion have caused serious damages to fishing communities around the globe. However, this situation is happening not only in the seas – it is also a common phenomenon in freshwater and inland fishing areas. Coastal and riparian communities living along the fresh water bodies face constant threats, leaving them with no peace or hope for the future.

The contribution of those communities to the global climate crisis is minimal to none. Yet frontline communities are the main victims as they face numerous threats. The consumeristic culture driven by the capitalist system and the promotion of petrochemicals and fossil fuels further deepens the crisis without offering real solutions. The capitalist system, led by corporations and supported by conservation NGOs, continues to propose false solutions. All while ignoring frontline communities' practical ways to cool Mother Earth and the sea.

Fisher peoples world-wide cannot escape from this crisis. As a global movement representing 10 million fishers, the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) cannot turn a blind eye and remain silent while our communities are among the immediate victims. Clear indicators are the loss of coastlines, destruction of property and fishing equipment, houses, displacement, and severe ecosystem devastations, among others.

In response, the 8th General Assembly of the WFFP, convened in Brazil on November 2024, adopted a series of resolutions to guide member organizations in addressing the climate issues we face. To this end, we wish to raise awareness by sharing clear facts, lived testimonies, and stories of our struggles. Guided by the Coordinating Committee of the WFFP, we decided to conduct a study across 10 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia.

This report is the result of those country case studies, conducted in Bangladesh, Belize, Brazil, Ecuador, Indonesia, Kenya, Senegal, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Our aim is to present this collective work at COP-30 in Belém, Brazil.

We extend our sincere thanks to all WFFP member organizations in these countries for their commitment in conducting field research, facilitating the work on the ground, and preparing the country reports in a timely manner. We also express our deep gratitude to Yifang Tang of FIAN International for her dedicated work as the lead researcher, and to Michelle Brown Ochaíta, intern with NAFSO and Alternatives Canada, for her dedication in copy-editing all the country case studies and the report. We, the WFFP, salute everyone who contributed in any way to making this effort a success, including Grassroots International for their steadfast support.

Finally, we echo the voice of frontline food producers and allies at the 3rd Nyéléni forum:

"We Need Systemic Change Now, No to Climate Change!"

Herman Kumara
General Secretary, World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The world's 600 million fisher peoples, collectors and coastal communities are already living on the frontlines of the climate crisis. Rising seas, warming waters, and extreme weather are destroying the ecosystems they depend on for food, livelihoods, identity, and self-determination. Despite contributing least to global emissions, fisher peoples are among the most severely affected, facing violations of their fundamental human rights, particularly the right to food and nutrition (RtFN), as well as rights to territories, water, housing, health, education, and culture. The current situation does not constitute merely an environmental crisis but a profound human rights emergency that disproportionately affects fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities who are true guardians of our ecosystems and biodiversity. This joint report, developed by the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) and FIAN International, documents how climate-induced disruptions - aggravated by industrial exploitation and state neglect - systematically violate the human rights of fisher communities worldwide.

The analysis centers on the RtFN through a food sovereignty lens, demonstrating how climate change undermines all core elements of this fundamental human right: availability of food from damaged ecosystems; accessibility, through restricted fishing grounds and economic hardship; adequacy, through forced dietary changes; and sustainability, through environmental degradation, broken community resilience systems, and long-term impacts. These violations cascade across the interconnected human rights of fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities, including the rights to territories, housing, water, health, education, and cultural identity.

Drawing on 10 case studies grounded on testimonies from fisher peoples across Asia (Bangladesh, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand), the Americas (Belize, Brazil, Ecuador), and Africa (Kenya, Senegal, South Africa), the report reveals seven interconnected critical areas of climate crisis:

- **1. Ecosystem Collapse:** Rising seas, shifting temperatures, and increasingly extreme weather are destroying breeding and nursery grounds of aquatic species, triggering mass die-offs, and accelerating the decline of fish stocks. Key species for culture and food systems are forced to migrate unpredictably, undermining generations of local knowledge, while habitats such as mangroves and coral reefs are lost. Intrusion of salinized water further deteriorates soil, equally destroying local agriculture. These pressures are compounded by destructive industrial activities - such as shrimp farming and mining – that further degrade fragile ecosystems, and strip fishers of the resources on which their realization of human rights and their survival depend.

- **2. Food Sovereignty Crisis:** As key fish species grow scarce, families are forced to sell their catch rather than consume it, while rising prices push communities toward cheaper, processed foods, eroding health and nutrition of fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities. Once self-sufficient fisher communities are increasingly reliant on inadequate, short-term external food aid and assistance. This shift represents not just food insecurity, but a fundamental erosion of food sovereignty - undermining fisher peoples' ability to feed themselves with dignity, autonomy, and cultural relevance.

- **3. Territorial Displacements:** Climate change is stripping fisher peoples off of their territories. Coastal erosion, flooding, drought, and salinization are forcing families from ancestral lands, destroying homes, and cutting communities off from the rivers, lakes, and seas that sustain them. Relocation sites, when provided, are often far from fishing grounds, lack basic infrastructure, and sever cultural and spiritual ties to water. Without recognition of customary tenure, displaced communities face heightened precarity, as they are denied compensation, and left without the territorial rights essential for their survival, governance systems, and way of life.

- **4. Economic Devastation:** Fisher peoples are losing up to half of their household incomes as catches decline, while fuel and operational costs continue to rise. To survive, many are compelled to switch

gear, travel farther, or enter entirely new forms of work – often in aquaculture, or construction, the very sectors destroying their resource base and their abilities to feed their families and realize their human rights. Repeated destruction of boats, nets, and landing infrastructure due to flooding, erosion and storms drives families deeper into debt, forcing migration or dependence on exploitative labor markets.

- **5. Social Disruption:** The collapse of ecosystems and livelihoods is breaking down traditional systems of food sharing, reciprocity, and mutual support that once ensured community resilience in times of scarcity. As these social fabrics erode, youth are increasingly forced into migration, community members are compelled to conduct illegal fishing or engage in precarious labor, leaving behind communities fragmented and weakened.

- **6. Cultural and Knowledge Loss:** Disruption of customary governance systems and traditional ecological knowledge undermines fisher peoples' cultural identity and conservation practices with devastating implication for future generations. These knowledge systems built over centuries of interaction with waters and ecosystems are critical for sustainable fisheries and climate adaptation. Their erosion represents not only a cultural loss for fisher peoples but also a loss for society, erasing globally valuable wisdom on biodiversity stewardship and resilience for the future.

- **7. Gendered Impacts:** Women bear disproportionate burdens in the climate crisis. They lose access and control over traditional harvesting grounds, processing spaces to coastal erosion, shoulder increased caregiving responsibilities as families face illness and displacement, and are largely excluded from climate decision-making. Yet women continue to play essential roles in sustaining households, organizing community resilience, and advancing alternative livelihood strategies – contributions that remain systematically undervalued and unsupported by existing state policies.

Despite legal obligations under international human rights law as well as environmental laws and policies, states consistently fail to protect fisher peoples' rights. Governments promote "false solutions" including Marine Protected Areas that exclude traditional fishers, carbon credit schemes that risk resource grabbing, industrial aquaculture disguised as climate action and solution to food insecurity, and massive infrastructure projects that displace communities while failing to address root causes and favoring corporate interests.

In all 10 cases, fisher peoples are not passive victims but active agents implementing genuine climate solutions: community-led environmental restoration, collective organization with significant women's but also youth leadership, and traditional knowledge preservation that maintains territorial connections. These bottom-up community-based approaches demonstrate effective alternatives to top-down false solutions without community consultation and engagement.

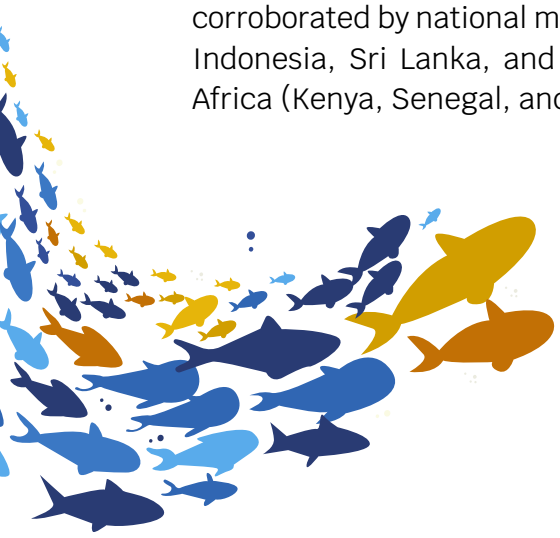
WFFP and FIAN International call for immediate action on human rights-based climate justice, formal recognition of customary territorial rights, meaningful participation in policy-making, support for community-led governance systems, adequate compensation and reparations, and gender-responsive climate policies. These demands center on protecting not only ecosystems but the human rights, food sovereignty, and survival of fisher peoples facing an unprecedented climate crisis. Protecting fisher peoples' rights is essential not only for their survival but for global food security, as they provide nutritious food for millions worldwide. The loss of their traditional ecological knowledge represents an irreplaceable loss for society's capacity to adapt to climate change and manage marine resources sustainably. This report demonstrates that climate justice for fisher peoples, collectors and coastal communities is inseparable from broader struggles for human rights, environmental protection, and social justice in the face of climate crisis.

1 INTRODUCTION

Climate change is today a lived reality for the world's 600 million fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities.[1][2] Rising sea levels, ocean warming and erratic weather patterns have deepened the vulnerability of those who have long depended on water and fisheries resources for their lives, livelihoods, food, identity, and self-determination. For generations, fisher peoples have sustainably used and managed marine resources through customary knowledge and collective governance. Yet climate-induced disruptions - aggravated by extractive blue economy projects, displacement, and profit-driven false climate solutions often propagated by states and corporations - seriously threaten, abuse, and violate their human rights, jeopardizing both their present and future survival.

This report draws attention to the frontline experiences of fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities confronting the harsh impacts of climate change - impacts that often result in serious violations of their human rights. Grounded in the voices and lived experiences of fisher peoples, it underscores that climate change is not only an environmental crisis, but also a human rights issue, disproportionately affecting historically marginalized communities - particularly fisher peoples, recognized as Indigenous and traditional peoples whose identities, rights, and survival are rooted in ancestral ties to the rivers, coastal landscapes, seas and oceans that have endured for millennia.[3] These human rights violations manifest most clearly in the erosion of the right to food and nutrition (hereafter the RtFN) – a fundamental human right – and extend to a broader range of interconnected human rights, including the rights to territories, housing, water, health, education, and cultural identity. In response to these realities, the report calls for support to community-led responses that uphold customary tenure systems and place fisher peoples' human rights and dignity at the center of climate policy-making and action.

At its 8th General Assembly held in November 2025 in Brazil, the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), the world's leading global mass-based social movement representing fisher peoples world-wide, took a landmark political decision to systematically highlight and document the impacts of the climate crisis on fisher communities, and to develop and articulate solutions rooted in their own knowledge and struggle.[4] This report is a direct outcome of that decision. It draws on 10 case studies selected, documented, and corroborated by national members of the WFFP from three continents: Asia (Bangladesh, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand), the Americas (Belize, Brazil, and Ecuador), and Africa (Kenya, Senegal, and South Africa).[5]



The case studies focus on fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities dependent on diverse ecosystems: Oceans, seas, lakes, rivers, mangroves, etc. At the initial stage, a questionnaire was collectively developed by cooperating WFFP members to guide the documentation of frontline experiences and challenges. These case studies reveal the shared climate change struggles of fisher communities worldwide. They were developed in close collaboration with communities directly experiencing severe climate change impacts, with testimonies serving as the primary source of information and supplemented by additional information where available. Each country's case study can be accessed individually online and serves as a standalone resource.[6]

In the following, a brief conceptual framework will be outlined, followed by the main findings of the 10 case studies. By centering the voices and the first-hand testimonies of the fishers – especially women – this report concludes with a set of recommendations addressing both states and international intergovernmental organizations, calling for climate justice that truly respects customary rights of fisher peoples, promotes fisher communities' control over territories, protects lives and livelihoods, and upholds the human rights and sovereignty of fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities.

Houses of fisher families destroyed by coastal erosion (Guet Ndar, Saint-Louis, Senegal).

Photo: Moustapha Dieng

2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK – CLIMATE CHANGE THROUGH A HUMAN RIGHTS LENS

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has long warned of the severe risks climate change poses to oceans and coastal communities. Its Fifth Assessment Synthesis Report projected that sea-level rise, erosion, saltwater intrusion, biodiversity loss, and intensified storms would undermine coastal systems and livelihoods, leading to displacement and conflict.[7] In its Sixth Assessment Report, the IPCC further concluded that global mean sea level is now increasing at unprecedented rates in at least 3,000 years, driven by human-induced warming.[8] The Sixth Assessment Report also highlighted the importance of inland waters and their ecology, projecting oxygen loss, increased algal blooms (caused by rising water temperatures), and the drying of rivers and small water bodies, all with negative consequences for biodiversity. Global warming is further accompanied by extreme droughts and floods, leading to water shortages and declining groundwater levels.[9]

These findings show that climate change must be understood not only as an environmental crisis but also as a fundamental threat to fisher peoples' survival. For fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities, whose lives and livelihoods, food subsistence, and cultures are inseparable from the waters they inhabit, these changes are not abstract scientific projections but daily realities. Rising seas, flooding, coastal and river erosion, extreme weather, and climate-related diseases affect their RtFN, housing, health, water, and cultural survival.[10] Climate change is therefore not only an ecological crisis but a profound human rights issue, one that exposes and deepens existing inequalities. Despite contributing the least to global greenhouse gas emissions, they are disproportionately burdened by its impacts.[11] Because human rights are interdependent, the denial of one right often leads to the erosion of others, illustrating how climate change creates cascading human rights violations. Respecting the human rights of fisher peoples therefore also means respecting and protecting the sea and its living beings, since the fisher peoples and the waters they depend on are inextricably connected.

"Climate change is a human rights crisis, not only an environmental one."[12]

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

THE RIGHT TO FOOD AND NUTRITION AND CONNECTED RIGHTS

Right to Food and Nutrition

This study applies a human rights framework to its analysis, focusing on the RtFN through a food sovereignty lens and related human rights. The RtFN is a fundamental human right recognized under international human rights law, i.e. the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).[13] All countries covered in the 10 case studies are state parties to the ICESCR and are therefore obliged to respect, protect, and fulfill this fundamental right.

As demonstrated in 10 case studies, climate change is disrupting the ability of fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities to access and produce adequate food in dignified and sustainable ways, directly threatening the enjoyment of their RtFN (See Box 1: Core Elements of Fisher Peoples' RtFN).[14] At the same time, climate impacts extend far beyond food, putting at risk other fundamental rights, including the rights to water, health, housing, education, and culture.

BOX 1: CORE ELEMENTS OF FISHER PEOPLES' RTFN

Accessibility: For fisher peoples, the RtFN is inseparable from secure access to and control over their territories. Food must be accessible (both economically and physically) to fisher peoples at all times. This includes not only fishing grounds (territorial waters, estuaries, rivers, and lakes) but also the waterfront lands needed to reach them and carry out essential lives and livelihood and food-related activities such as storing nets and boats, processing and drying fish, and selling the catch. Recognition of customary tenure rights and customary governance systems over land, waters (inland and marine) and fisheries is therefore fundamental to exercising the RtFN.[15]

Availability: Food must be available in sufficient quantity from healthy seas, rivers, and coastal ecosystems. Protecting habitats such as mangroves, coral reefs, and spawning grounds is vital for ensuring fish populations and biodiversity. Availability also extends beyond fisher communities: as the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food notes, "The full enjoyment of human rights by small-scale fishers and fish workers is a necessary precondition for the realization of the right to food by everyone."[16] Small-scale fisheries not only sustain fisher households but also provide nutritious food for millions globally.

Adequacy: Food must be safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate. For fisher peoples, this means access to fish, shellfish, and marine species that are part of their diets, traditions, and identities. Adequacy must also consider the extreme dependence on and high consumption of marine resources by fisher peoples and coastal communities.[17] These foods provide vital proteins, omega-3 fatty acids, and micronutrients, while also sustaining cultural and spiritual well-being. Pollution, overfishing, and climate change increasingly threaten adequacy by contaminating marine food sources or reducing their availability.

Sustainability: The RtFN must be guaranteed for present and future generations. For fisher peoples, sustainability links environmental stewardship and cultural continuity. It involves protecting marine ecosystems, preserving spawning grounds, and ensuring fishing practices rooted in traditional knowledge which support natural regeneration. Sustainability for fisher peoples also means transmitting knowledge, fishing techniques, and food practices across generations, alongside maintaining systems of food sharing and mutual support. Protecting the right of fisher peoples to remain fisher peoples – rather than being displaced into alternative livelihoods or aid dependency – is essential to preserving both their RtFN and their cultural identity.[18]

Central to understanding these interconnected impacts are customary rights. Fisher peoples' customary rights encompass far more than just territorial access – they represent comprehensive systems of governance, practice and local knowledge that have sustained coastal and marine ecosystems for generations.

Customary Rights: From Fisher Peoples' Perspectives

Fishing, predating animal husbandry and agriculture, is a customary practice that has sustained sedentary communities throughout human prehistory. Since the rise of civilizations, inland riverbanks and coastal landscapes have been established and sustained by fisher peoples.[19] Inland water courses, wetland complexes, and coastal landscapes have been inscribed, nurtured, sustained and transformed by fisher peoples, who view the ocean as their mother and rivers as their kin. These waters are sacred ecosystems, providing not only their livelihood and well-being but a way of life, profound sense of identity, and culture.

Fisher commons – or customary commons – lay the foundation for realizing the RtFN and related rights. Historically, aquatic resources such as rivers, lakes, seas, oceans, brackish water bodies connected to the sea, and forests such as mangroves have each held unique meaning for fisher peoples. Traditionally these resources are collectively governed, conserved, and claimed as part of their fisher commons, where rules on access, gear, and seasons are determined through community-based customary systems.[20]

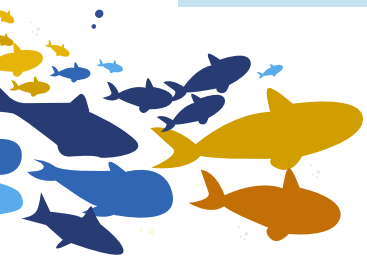
BOX 2: EXAMPLES OF FISHER PEOPLES' CUSTOMARY RIGHTS

Sri Lanka

The *Padu* (literally meaning "site") system is a centuries-old fishing practice deeply rooted in the Negombo and Chilaw lagoons. This customary governance system, based on a lottery-style rotational method, determines who can fish using stake nets in the most productive sites ("*Padu*"). The system not only balances the need to secure livelihoods but also ensures that the lagoon remains ecologically viable, allowing fisheries resources to be sustained for future generations without depleting the very ecosystems on which fisher peoples depend.[22]

South Africa

Kosi Bay, a pristine estuarine system in the northeast of South Africa, has sustained the Tsonga community for over 700 years. Fishing is deeply embedded in their cultural identity, shaped by generations of ecological knowledge. Their practices include seasonal harvesting, the use of traditional fish traps known as *izivikele*, and spearfishing with handmade wooden spears. Access to these resources is regulated through customary law: only clan members may own fish traps, while outsiders may fish only with the permission of the local customary committee of trap owners.[23]



Brazil

In Northeast Brazil, artisanal fishers practice the *caminho e assento* system, a customary method of locating and governing fishing grounds. Using mental maps and natural landmarks such as mountain peaks, fishers identify small offshore rocky bottoms (*cabeços*) without the aid of compasses. These grounds are considered the discovery and property of the skipper who first identified them, with their locations often kept secret and passed down within families. Authority and respect within the community derive from this knowledge, which regulates access to scarce marine resources and reflects a form of territoriality rooted in traditional knowledge.[24]

These examples demonstrate how customary rights of fisher peoples encompass not only governance but also fishing practice and collective decision making that sustain ecosystems and communities. Through customary rules such as seasonal closures, gear restrictions, and rotational harvesting, fisher peoples have maintained biodiversity and ensured intergenerational equity for centuries. These systems, rooted in collective knowledge and cultural practices, are recognized in international frameworks such as the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land Fisheries and Forests (Tenure Guidelines, 2012) and the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines, 2014), which affirm the centrality of customary tenure and governance in securing the RtFN and other human rights. Furthermore, the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP, 2018) requires States to take appropriate measures to ensure legal recognition of land tenure rights – including customary land tenure rights – and protect the natural commons and their related systems of collective use and management.[25] Climate change directly threatens these human rights by undermining the ecosystems on which customary governance depends – causing species decline, habitat loss, and unpredictable migration patterns that erode both tenure security and management practices. As a result, fisher peoples face not only ecological loss but also violations of their RtFN, cultural rights, food

Traditional fishers from Negombo beach, Sri Lanka

Photo: Claudio Sieber

sovereignty, and dignity. Protecting and strengthening customary rights is therefore essential to safeguarding their human rights in the face of climate crisis.

Right to Territories – How It Connects to Customary Rights

Although fisher peoples are diverse – indigenous or made up of various socio-economic and cultural groups-, one thing is common among them: their profound connection to their territories.[26] Land and water are inseparable for fisher peoples who view land and oceans as spaces "integrated within systems of customary tenure, local knowledge and resource use."[27] Fisher territories encompass this broader land-water continuum that sustain fisher communities, extending beyond fisher commons to encompass landing sites, areas for storing nets and boats, processing and drying areas, markets for selling catch, but also housing settlements and sacred sites.

The right to territories is affirmed in several international human rights standards including the UNDROP, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), the ILO Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (1989) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (CEDAW)'s General recommendation No. 34 (2016) on the rights of rural women.[28] Together, these instruments recognize the fisher peoples' right to territories – the lands, waters, and ecosystems they have traditionally occupied and used. For fisher peoples, the right to territories is essential to establish the legal and physical boundaries within which they can exercise self-determination, protect their livelihoods, and resist external appropriation - whether from industrial fishing fleets, coastal development, extractive industries, aquaculture, or "fortress conservation" projects. Without secure territorial rights, customary governance systems cannot be realized: communities cannot enforce seasonal closures if their fishing grounds are inaccessible, nor can they maintain spiritual and cultural practices if sacred sites are appropriated or lost to climate change impacts such as sea-level rise. Conversely, the right to territories without customary governance risks leading to resource depletion, since access alone does not ensure that fish commons will be managed sustainably or equitably. The complementarity of territorial rights and customary governance therefore creates a powerful synergy: when both are recognized and protected, fisher peoples can sustain ecosystems while securing their rights, culture, and dignity.

Food Sovereignty Framework for the Fisher Peoples' Right to Food and Nutrition

Finally, from a food sovereignty perspective, a right which is also recognized in the UNDROP (Art. 15.4), realizing the RtFN for fisher peoples requires protecting both territorial integrity and nutritional autonomy. For fisher communities, food sovereignty means defending the collective human rights of fishers, valuing and safeguarding their culture and knowledge, and ensuring that fisher peoples – women and men of present and future generations alike - are central to decision-making on issues affecting fisheries. It calls for localized food systems that prioritize community control, ecological stewardship, cultural relevance, and sustainable fishing practices in both environmental and social terms. These principles reject top-down, market-driven models in favor of bottom-up, locally adapted, socially just, and environmentally sustainable approaches that affirm the dignity, autonomy, and collective rights of fisher peoples.[29]

As underlined by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, protecting the human rights of fishers is "a necessary precondition for the realization of the right to food by everyone" because fisher peoples are essential actors in feeding communities world-wide and key in food systems. When climate change disrupts their ability to fish, as explained in the following section of the report, it does not only threaten fisher peoples' and coastal communities' RtFN, it also intrinsically threatens that of the entire coastal and riparian communities and many others who rely on fish as a primary source of healthy diets.

STATES OBLIGATIONS VIS-À-VIS THE RTFN IN THE CONTEXT OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Human rights and state obligations are inseparable. States must respect, protect, and fulfill the RtFN of fisher peoples in the face of climate change. The recent Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) confirms that climate inaction breaches international law and underscores that worsening impacts such as sea-level rise, heat, water scarcity, and food insecurity directly threaten fundamental rights, including those to life, food, housing, and water. While it is beyond the scope of this report to examine the Advisory Opinion in detail, its relevance is clear: states cannot ignore their human rights obligations in the context of the climate crisis.[30]

The state's *obligation to respect* the RtFN requires that states refrain from interfering with fisher communities' access to this fundamental right, including by avoiding denial of access to territories upon which they depend for food. In the context of climate change impacts, this obligation means states must abstain and withdraw from all projects (including energy and infrastructure, etc.) that risk impairing the RtFN of fisher peoples. States must also uphold fisher peoples' human rights in the implementation of climate policies and programs, including ensuring their rights to information and participation in climate and environmental decision-making.[31] This includes respecting their right to give or withhold free, prior, and informed consent, while ensuring „an inclusive, equitable and gender-based approach to public participation in all climate related actions."[32]

The state's *obligation to protect* requires preventing third parties – including corporations and other private actors – from violating the RtFN. This includes preventing land and ocean grabbing that disposes and displaces fisher communities and ensuring that private/corporate conservation or coastal development projects do not abuse or violate this right. Regarding climate change, states must ensure accountability of private actors for harm caused to fisher peoples and ecosystems and protect fisher peoples against infringements by third parties by enacting and enforcing legislation to prevent negative climate impacts from private actors, ensuring that climate mitigation and adaptation measures do not infringe on human rights, and protecting environmental defenders among fisher peoples from violence, intimidation, and criminalization by private actors.[33]

Lastly, the *obligation to fulfil* requires states to take proactive steps to ensure fisher peoples' access to adequate food, particularly during emergencies, while actively providing, securing, and restoring access to traditional fishing grounds, coastal lands, and waters essential for their subsistence and livelihoods. This includes legally recognizing and promoting collective customary tenure and customary territorial rights. Furthermore, states

must take proactive measures to facilitate the enjoyment of basic human rights, including the RtFN, by introducing laws, policies and programs that accomplish human rights-based climate adaptation and mitigation measures while ensuring effective, affordable, and timely access to justice and remedies for those negatively impacted by climate change and climate response measures.[34]

Climate change laws also oblige states to protect the rights and knowledge of fisher peoples and coastal communities. The Paris Agreement requires climate actions to respect human rights, including those of Indigenous Peoples and local communities (Preamble), and to ground adaptation in traditional and local knowledge (Art. 7.5). The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) obliges Parties to develop adaptation programs in vulnerable sectors such as coastal zones and fisheries (Art. 4.1(b), (e)), ensure public access to information on climate change and its effect (Art. 6(a) ii) and ensure public participation in climate decision-making (Art. 6(a)(ii)). The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) commits States to preserve and maintain community knowledge (Art. 8(j)), protect customary sustainable use of biodiversity (Art. 10(c)), and involve communities in decisions affecting their resources (Art. 14(1)(a)). Together, these obligations affirm fisher peoples as rights-holders and custodians whose participation and knowledge are indispensable for climate resilience and biodiversity conservation.

Despite these legal obligations, fisher communities worldwide are experiencing unprecedented violations of their fundamental rights as the impacts of climate change intensify and states fail to meet their obligations vis-à-vis the RtFN in the context of climate change. The gap between legal frameworks and lived realities - as the case studies demonstrate - reveals a persistent pattern of inadequate, absent, or even counterproductive state action. Such failures leave fisher peoples increasingly vulnerable to climate impacts while simultaneously undermining their customary tenure rights, self-determination, and the ability to realize their human rights and sustain their livelihoods.[35]

Catholic church submerged in water (Komote Village, Lake Turkana, Kenya).

Photo: Riyaz Diro

3 MAIN FINDINGS

RIGHT TO FOOD AND NUTRITION

The realization of the Right to Food and Nutrition (RtFN) for fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities is being systematically undermined and jeopardized by climate change through multiple interconnected factors that violate all core contents of this fundamental right. Climate impacts are destroying the *availability* of traditional food sources through damaged ecosystems; reducing *accessibility* (both physical and economic) through restricted access to fishing grounds and economic hardship; compromising adequacy through forced dietary changes and nutritional deficiencies; undermining *sustainability* by degrading ecosystems now and in the future, breaking down community social fabrics; and eroding agency by forcing dependence on inadequate external aid. The following analysis examines how climate change impacts fisher peoples' RtFN across these critical dimensions through seven interconnected key areas of impact.

Climate-Driven Disruptions to Fisheries and Ecosystems

The RtFN of fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities is increasingly under threat from climate change, which is degrading aquatic and intertidal ecosystems across all case studies. Rising sea levels, flooding, and river or coastal erosion are submerging breeding and harvesting grounds, while prolonged heatwaves and shifts in water temperature weaken fish reproduction and survival. Once-abundant species that sustained communities' livelihoods and diets are now in steep decline or disappearing entirely, with some regions reporting mass die-offs of aquatic life, such as in Brazil and South Africa. In addition, changing temperatures are driving species to migrate to cooler waters, forcing fishers to travel farther at higher costs and making migration patterns increasingly erratic and unpredictable.

Also, local agricultural production is increasingly threatened by floods and drought, undermining food sovereignty and forcing greater dependence on external markets.

Dead fish found in the Tapajós River (Amador, Brazil).

Photo: Raique Pereira

Industrial Pressures and Denial of Access to Fishing Grounds

These climate stressors are compounded by environmental degradation linked to extractive and industrial activities. Examples include intensive shrimp farming in Ecuador, Sri Lanka, and Thailand; sand mining in Belize, Senegal, and Sri Lanka; unregulated housing construction in South Africa; dam construction in Kenya; deforestation and industrial agriculture in Bangladesh, Belize, and Brazil; logging in Brazil and Thailand; mining in Brazil; large-scale infrastructure projects in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, and industrial waste and plastic pollution in Bangladesh. A particularly damaging impact is the large-scale destruction of mangroves - essential breeding and nursery grounds for marine species - by shrimp aquaculture, logging, and coastal development. This loss has disrupted ecological cycles, accelerated marine species decline, and broken the synchrony between ecosystems and generational fishing knowledge, leaving fisher peoples unable to plan seasons effectively and forcing them into adaptations.

Access to traditional fishing grounds has been denied in several countries, further threatening the RtFN of fisher peoples. In South Africa, the designation of marine protected areas (MPAs) has made it nearly impossible for fishers to continue their subsistence and livelihood activities, while similarly in Sri Lanka, MPAs have restricted fishers' access to traditional fishing grounds. In Thailand, the reclassification of traditional crab harvesting sites as state conservation zones has literally closed off community access, further straining their ability to feed themselves. Such forms of "fortress conservation" ignore the fact that fisher peoples are traditional custodians of ocean and river territories, with deep knowledge of how to protect and conserve ecosystems. The WFFP recognizes fisher peoples as guardians of marine biodiversity: "they know better than anyone that ecosystems and territories must be conserved, and they know how to do this." Conservation models that exclude fisher communities, restrict their access, and undermine their knowledge and ways of living are not only detrimental, they cannot be solutions.

Economic Hardship and Livelihood Destruction

These ecosystem changes are translating directly into severe economic hardship for fisher communities. Fishers are experiencing drastic income losses - sometimes as high as 50% - and fishers are compelled to travel farther at higher operational costs while rougher seas simultaneously limit the number of fishing trips they can undertake. This double burden has led to – in the face of rising prices - further reductions in already meager household incomes, with serious implications for communities' ability to realize their RtFN.

In addition, many fishers are forced to switch gear, target different species, or alter fishing methods - adaptations that place new pressures not only on already stressed marine and inland ecosystems but also on household budgets. In Senegal, for example, fishers are compelled to use finer mesh nets in desperate attempts to catch enough to meet their families' nutritional needs. However, catching smaller fish prevents populations from replenishing, creating a vicious cycle of ecological degradation. In Kenya, fishers abandon traditional fishing practices in favor of modern techniques out of economic necessity, but this results in higher maintenance costs, further environmental harm, and increased dependence on markets and external supply chains.

The combined pressures have forced many fishers to abandon their traditional identities and livelihoods entirely. In Indonesia and Ecuador, fishers are being compelled to give up their identity as fishers and work as laborers in manufacturing, construction, and aquaculture sectors under precarious work conditions. Tragically, these are often the very sectors that have caused detrimental impacts on the ecosystems necessary for fisher peoples' livelihoods in the first place, creating a cycle where communities are forced to participate in the destruction of their own resource base.

Community-built embankment to protect the coast from erosion (Muthupanthiya, Sri Lanka).

Photo: Herman Kumara

Beyond marine and aquatic resources, climate impacts are extending to terrestrial livelihoods that complement fishing income. In Thailand, saltwater intrusion and drought have reduced honey production from mangroves, while fruit yields and other agricultural produce have declined. In Senegal and Sri Lanka, coastal erosion has reduced space available for women fishers to process and market fish. In Indonesia, entire communities have undergone multiple livelihood transitions within recent decades, converting from rice farming to shrimp farming and then to fishing as environmental contexts shifted due to climate change.

Food Sovereignty and Nutritional Impacts

The combined environmental and economic pressures are creating a direct crisis in food sovereignty and nutrition. Key local fish species - central to diets, livelihood and tradition are becoming scarce, forcing reduced consumption and driving up market prices. Fisher families increasingly sell economically valuable fish rather than consuming it themselves, while declining catches have led to harvesting of juvenile fish, creating additional ecological damage for future stocks. Being able to eat their own catch is not only essential for meeting communities' nutritious needs, but also integral to the cultural identity, autonomy, and agency of fisher peoples, sustaining their way of life and food sovereignty.

With rising food prices and limited income, many households are turning to cheap processed foods, compromising dietary diversity and nutrition - a pattern evident across Bangladesh, Belize, Ecuador, Kenya, and Thailand. In Kenya, families report extended periods without adequate food, making it difficult to maintain normal, active lives. Many families are forced to eat less and skip meals, with children particularly affected by inadequate nutrition and lack of important proteins.

Infrastructure Damage and Compounding Vulnerabilities

Extreme weather events compound these challenges by repeatedly damaging fishing equipment, boats, jetties, embankments, landing sites, and processing facilities across Bangladesh, Belize, Brazil, Senegal, and other locations. Such damages place additional pressure on already strained household budgets, forcing fishers to take loans and enter cycles of exploitation and dependence.

In Senegal, coastal erosion has destroyed women processors' workplaces, forcing concentration of activities within limited spaces that creates respiratory problems, asthma, and other health issues from smoke exposure (as women use straw to smoke fish). Combined with inadequate living conditions, these factors contribute to a range of health problems.

Social Disruption and Loss of Community Resilience

These multiple crises are fundamentally weakening local food systems and social structures that have traditionally ensured community resilience. Communities once reliant on locally produced food are becoming dependent on external markets, while traditional food-sharing and mutual support mechanisms deteriorate. The disappearance of informal exchanges, such as community-based mussel trading in South Africa, has limited marine resource access for non-harvesting households. The decline of vital fish species is undermining traditional systems of food sharing and mutual support among community members in Kenya.

Senegalese navy intercepts young fishers attempting to leave the country by sea (Dakar, Senegal).

Photo: Mbsissine Thiam

Such breakdowns extend far beyond food access, eroding the social networks and fabrics that traditionally ensured community resilience and collective solidarity during periods of scarcity. The crisis has triggered significant social changes, with declining catches leading to migration among young fishers, illegal fishing in international waters that risks arrest, and forced entry into wage labor or seasonal migration to towns.

Retrogression from Self-Sufficiency to Aid Dependence

The combined pressures have created a clear retrogression in fisher peoples' RtFN. Communities that were once self-sufficient agents in realizing their RtFN are becoming increasingly dependent on social protection programs and emergency aid, as documented in Bangladesh, Brazil, Indonesia, Kenya, and South Africa. However, this aid is often inadequate, insufficient, short-lived, fails to reach those in need, or suffers from delivery interruptions.

In Brazil, food basket quality is reportedly poor, containing low-nutritional value items and even expired products that fail to meet basic dietary needs. Since 2020, community dependence on external aid has increased dramatically, representing a fundamental loss of agency in deciding how and what to feed themselves - a clear retrogression from their previous self-sufficiency. Similarly in Indonesia, short term relief such as food aid during crisis and religious holidays ultimately fails to address structural issues and instead helps sustain ongoing crisis.

Fishers carry food baskets (Amador, Brazil).

Photo: Josana Pinto

Climate change has created compounding crises that reflect deepening threats to the RtFN and the right to a dignified life for fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities. The transformation from self-sufficient food producers to aid recipients represents not merely economic hardship, but a fundamental erosion of community autonomy, food sovereignty, and traditional ways of life. This systematic undermining of fisher peoples' RtFN through climate-induced ecosystem collapse, economic devastation, and social disruption constitutes a violation of their human rights that demands immediate, comprehensive, and rights-based responses from governments and the international community. The following section examines how these impacts on the RtFN are interconnected with violations of fisher peoples' rights to territories, housing, water, and other fundamental human rights.

RIGHT TO TERRITORIES

Across the case studies, fisher communities are increasingly facing climate-induced displacement as a direct result of worsening environmental conditions, including coastal and riverbank erosion, prolonged droughts, extreme flooding and storms. In countries like Bangladesh, Belize, Brazil, Indonesia, Kenya, Senegal, and Sri Lanka, homes and farmlands have been submerged or rendered uninhabitable, forcing families to abandon their traditional territories. In Bangladesh, more than half of the population in Bhola has experienced multiple displacements in the past five years. In Kenya, despite the scale of the crisis, there has been no government assistance, while in South Africa, displaced fisher community members remain in temporary shelters with no long-term housing solutions, and in Senegal, the relocation sites lack water and electricity. These displacements are often involuntary and marked by insecure tenure in new locations, leaving communities without secure and stable access to the natural resources they depend on for subsistence and livelihoods, in violation of their right to territories. Relocation sites are often remote and lack basic infrastructure like water and electricity, making daily life more precarious and compounding challenges to accessing health clinics, schools, and markets. The inability to fish, harvest, or collect resources from mangroves not only undermines the RtFN but also threatens a range of interconnected rights, including the rights to housing, education, health, and cultural survival, as further informed below. While land titles cannot physically prevent climate-induced displacement, the absence of legally recognized customary tenure rights exacerbates fisher peoples' dispossession: without recognition,

communities are denied access to adaptation planning, restitution, or compensation when displacement occurs.[36]

The social and psychological toll of involuntary displacement is equally devastating. The loss of home, territory, and livelihood has led to significant distress and trauma - especially among women, who often serve as caregivers and community anchors. Older women and the poorest households tend to be the most affected, as broken community support networks leave them particularly vulnerable. Reports from Bangladesh highlight cases of gender-based violence linked to displacement, while in Belize, women have experienced symptoms of post-traumatic stress tied to the upheaval of their lives. In Brazil, prolonged droughts have dried up key waterways, cutting off riverine villages from basic services and exposing them to longer periods of isolation. Floods, when they come, destroy cultivated land and compromise housing structures, completing the cycle of instability and dispossession.

These forms of climate-driven displacement are not isolated events, but part of a broader systemic pattern. Poor governance, weak state responses, and lack of inclusive adaptation planning continue to deepen the vulnerability of fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities, who are among the most exposed to climate impacts yet often left without protection or support.

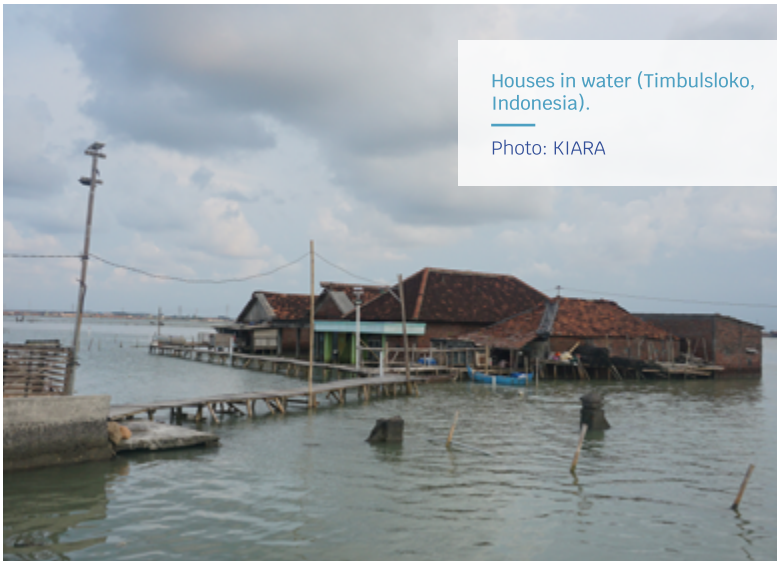
Relocation site of Komote Village (Lake Turkana, Kenya).

Photo: Riyaz Diro

RIGHT TO HOUSING

Rising water levels, along with land erosion and flooding, have washed away homes, playgrounds, and cemeteries - impacting the most vulnerable groups, particularly the elderly and children. In Senegal, the homes of more than 300 families in the village of Guet Ndar in Saint-Louis were destroyed by erosion and severe storms, but government-led relocation and resettlement programs often fail to consider fisher peoples' livelihoods. Women who once sold fish in their local markets can no longer continue this work due to prohibitive transportation costs. In South Africa, affected families remain in temporary shelters with no long-term housing plan, reflecting the government's failure to uphold its human rights obligations in the face of climate disasters. In Indonesia, the situation has become especially alarming: widespread flooding has forced fisher peoples to adapt by constructing stilt houses. These structures allow residents to raise their homes in response to rising water levels, but they present a significant financial burden, as elevating an existing home often costs more than building a new one. To cope with frequent tidal flooding, villagers have also built makeshift roads using wooden planks. However, these roads require constant repair due to ongoing inundation. The loss of homes and forced relocation have further restricted villagers' mobility, limiting their access to essential services and livelihoods.

RIGHT TO WATER



Houses in water (Timbulsloko, Indonesia).

Photo: KIARA

The right to water is increasingly under threat in many fisher communities affected by climate change. In Bangladesh and other case study areas, drinking water sources have either completely disappeared or become undrinkable due to salinization. Flooding has further deteriorated local water sources, forcing women and children to walk longer distances to fetch water – often from less reliable or safe sources. Meanwhile in Thailand, recurring droughts and rising temperatures have rendered traditional water resources, such as ponds, insufficient for household needs and the cultivation of food, particularly in orchards. This has led to increased irrigation costs. At the same time, income losses caused by climate impacts limit families' ability to maintain and improve water infrastructure, with many unable to afford essentials like filter replacements and equipment repairs. These compounded challenges severely undermine communities' access to safe, sufficient, and affordable water – an essential human right.

RIGHT TO CULTURE

The right to culture of fisher peoples is deeply affected by the climate crisis, whose ways of life are intimately tied to their environments. As weather and water patterns become increasingly unpredictable, fisher peoples in places like Bangladesh and Senegal find themselves unable to rely on traditional ecological knowledge passed down over generations. This is not merely a loss for their communities but for society as a whole. Traditional ecological knowledge, passed down through generations, holds critical insights for sustainable resource management and climate adaptation. It goes beyond livelihoods, linking fishing to identity, heritage, and cultural continuity, and has been shown to strengthen biodiversity conservation and food systems.

Climate change is disrupting these knowledge systems by altering weather patterns, species composition, and migration, forcing the abandonment of traditional practices. This creates "non-economic loss and damage" that extends far beyond fisher peoples.[37] When such knowledge disappears, society loses early warning systems, sustainable harvesting methods, and ecosystem monitoring capacities that have proven effective for centuries. Once lost, these resources cannot be recovered, leaving all communities more vulnerable to environmental uncertainty and collapse.

Furthermore, in Belize, Brazil, Ecuador, Indonesia, Kenya, Senegal and Sri Lanka, the loss of ancestral lands, graves, and sacred cultural and religious sites due to erosion and flooding is erasing living heritage and disrupting spiritual practices. The younger generation is becoming increasingly disconnected from fishing traditions, threatening the continuity of cultural identity. Also, fishing ceremonies are being altered or abandoned altogether. Forced migration and the displacement of youth further challenge traditional social roles and weaken intergenerational ties. These losses represent not just environmental damage, but a profound erosion of collective memory and cultural integrity of fisher peoples.

Cemetaries under water (Timbulsloko, Indonesia)

Photo: Roni

RIGHT TO EDUCATION

The right to education is increasingly compromised for children of fisher peoples. In many cases, families are unable to afford school fees due to economic hardship and income loss, leading to high dropout rates. Climate-induced displacement further disrupts schooling, as relocation often distances children from educational facilities. In Indonesia, for example, the submergence of homes forces children to rely on boats to reach school, placing additional financial strain on families. Frequent flooding, uncertainty, and the need to move create psychological stress, emotional distress, and social stigma for pupils. The increased cost and difficulty of travel to school, especially for girls, contributes to early dropout and raises the risk of early pregnancy, as already seen in Kenya. In some communities, such as in Senegal, illiteracy rates remain as high as 80%, reflecting a broader systemic failure to protect children's right to education in the face of environmental crises.

RIGHT TO HEALTH

Climate change is undermining the right to health for fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities in multiple ways: There are rising incidences of climate-sensitive diseases such as cholera, particularly among vulnerable populations. In areas affected by drought, such as Brazil, respiratory infections linked to fire outbreaks and dust exposure are becoming more common. Changing rainfall patterns have also led to a surge in vector-borne diseases like dengue and malaria (e.g. Ecuador, Sri Lanka), due to the expansion of mosquito habitats. The situation is worsened by the lack of basic sanitation and potable water. In South Africa, the discharge of untreated sewage into rivers and marine zones – caused by damaged wastewater treatment facilities due to floods – further contaminates water sources. Shellfish like mussels, which are filter feeders, accumulate pollutants such as *E. coli* and heavy metals, posing biohazards to women and families who depend on them for food and income. Women, in particular, are exposed to health risks when handling and

consuming contaminated seafood, and they bear an unequal burden in caring for sick family members. In Senegal, women fish processors are exposed to toxic fumes due to shrinking workspaces, which force them into confined areas.

A lack of sufficient income, coupled with the rising cost of living and accumulated debt burdens, is further limiting fisher peoples' access to healthcare and essential medicines. Health services remain difficult to reach – especially for pregnant women – and local clinics are often under-resourced and ill-equipped, as seen in Kenya. These structural limitations are exacerbated by climate-related disasters, which can cut off entire villages from transportation routes and essential services for extended periods. Meanwhile, the physical demands of longer working hours, combined with reduced rest and recovery time, are contributing to rising stress and fatigue. As iterated above, mental health (e.g., depression, and emotional distress) is also a growing concern, as the constant threat of displacement and loss of livelihoods creates chronic psychological stress (Brazil, Kenya, and Sri Lanka). Altogether, these conditions highlight how the climate crisis is not only environmental but deeply human – posing a profound threat to the physical, mental, and social well-being of fisher communities, while entrenching gender inequality, as women shoulder a disproportionate burden of care and face the double strain of lost income and increased caregiving demands, undermining their rights and autonomy.

Remains of a house damaged by the 2022 KZN floods (KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa).

Photo: Nobathembu Ndzengu

4 STATES' CLIMATE CHANGE POLICES AND FALSE SOLUTIONS

The case studies presented above clearly demonstrate the undeniable connection between climate change and human rights violations, revealing the devastation inflicted on fisher peoples' lives, livelihoods, and fundamental human rights in the context of absent or inadequate state action. Notably, the 10 countries examined are state parties to key international human rights covenants and conventions and are therefore legally obliged under international human rights law to respect, protect, and fulfill the RtFN, as well as other interrelated rights. These same states have adopted climate change policies aimed at protecting coastal and marine ecosystems and sustainably managing resources critical to the survival of fisher peoples - such as mangrove reforestation initiatives in Senegal, Thailand, and others.

However, as the case studies show, governments have failed to uphold their human rights obligations vis-à-vis climate change impacts. Policies are inadequately implemented, suffer from major gaps, or prioritize lucrative industries such as tourism and infrastructure development over the human rights of local fishers. In many cases, states actively promote so-called "false solutions" to climate change that further marginalize fisher communities. Governance mechanisms behind these false solutions are top-down, dominated by private sector actors, with little to no meaningful participation from those most affected, excluding them from climate adaptation and mitigation strategies.

For example, the expansion of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) under the guise of conservation as part of climate mitigation strategies is increasingly denying fisher peoples' access to and control over traditional fishing grounds, violating their customary tenure and other associated human rights. Such trends are visible in Belize, Ecuador, Indonesia, Senegal, Sri Lanka, and South Africa. In Belize, a village adjacent to the case study area illustrates how conservation efforts erase human habitation in pursuit of environmental protection, while real threats to the Monkey River Village community continue to persist. Similarly, conservation initiatives carried out without adequate consultation undermine fisher families' ability to realize their human rights, even as the essential natural resources on which they depend continue to degrade. In many cases, no viable alternative livelihoods or adequate compensation are provided to affected communities. In some instances, this has led to conflict over scarce resources, both among fisher households and with non-fisher communities (e.g. Senegal).

Carbon credits and carbon markets are increasingly promoted in the case study countries, prioritizing corporate interests over fisher peoples' rights. This is evident in Belize (Blue Bonds for Ocean Conservation, also criticized as a "debt-for-nature swap"), Indonesia (Blue Finance, Blue Bonds, Debt-for-Nature Swaps), Sri Lanka (Blue Carbon Project), and Thailand (Carbon credit). In Thailand, the government is actively brokering connections between private companies and coastal communities, providing financial incentives (e.g. tax exemptions) to the private sector. Under the pretense of mangrove restoration and

boosting national carbon sinks, forest concessions are granted to private entities without any consultation with the affected communities, posing serious risks of resource grabbing and displacement of traditional fisher peoples.

Alarmingly, aquaculture – particularly shrimp farming, a major driver of mangrove destruction as observed in Ecuador and Thailand – is now being promoted as a climate solution. In Ecuador, an international conservation organization is piloting "Climate Smart Shrimp" with an aquaculture tech company, offering farmers loans to adopt eco-friendly practices and restore mangroves. The initiative claims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, protect biodiversity, and enhance the climate resilience of seafood production.[38] The impacts of this and similar programs remain to be seen.

Furthermore, Blue Economy projects are intensifying pressures on local livelihoods and accelerating physical changes, such as coastal erosion from port construction. Sri Lanka's Colombo Port City Project has already destroyed extensive coastal ecosystems, nearshore fisheries, and fishing community habitats.[39] In Kenya, the South Lokichar oil development – linked to major infrastructure like Lamu Port and the LAPSSET corridor – threatens Lake Turkana's aquatic ecosystems.[40] In Senegal, World Bank-funded coastal tourism near Saly is impacting the Mbour region, as fishers face rising erosion and exclusion from decision-making, highlighting deep inequalities in climate adaptation.[41]

The construction of large-scale infrastructure such as tetrapods and concrete sea walls is often promoted as a response to erosion and flooding, yet it represents another false solution. In Indonesia, for example, the "Java Giant Sea Wall,"[42] planned to stretch over 500–700 km,[43] will cost an estimated 80 billion USD and take up to 20 years to complete.[44] While designed to curb tidal flooding on Java's north coast, it risks massive environmental damage from sand extraction, displacement of fishers, loss of access to mooring places, and longer detours to reach fishing grounds. A human rights-based approach would instead begin with understanding the specific causes of tidal flooding in each region and developing – with fisher communities – locally grounded solutions that respect fisher peoples' rights, protect their territories, and strengthen food sovereignty.

In addition to these false solutions, the case studies reveal that state responses often involve displacement-based rehabilitation programs and ad-hoc aid and assistance (e.g. Bangladesh, Belize, Brazil, Indonesia, Kenya, Sri Lanka), while leaving fisher communities which further violate fisher peoples' human rights. In South Africa, for example, local authorities were aware of the flooding risks linked to climate change as early as 2006, yet government responses have remained short-lived and inadequate, reflecting systemic failures in disaster preparedness and response.

While all case studies reflect how climate change worsens gender inequality, a recurring concern is the lack of gender-sensitive climate policies. In Senegal, women are not adequately considered in adaptation measures, their access to technical and financial support is limited, and no specific actions are in place to protect the fish processing sites they manage. Women have been excluded from the formulation and decision-making processes of climate policy, and actual implementation fails to address their differentiated vulnerabilities.

Other constraints, such as government-imposed fishing bans in Bangladesh and Belize, further threaten community's ability to feed themselves, yet are enforced without providing fisher communities viable alternatives or support systems.

Finally, across all case studies, governments have consistently failed to respond adequately to disasters. These gaps in state accountability and participation not only violate human rights but also place fisher peoples at heightened risk of exclusion, poverty, and displacement in the face of climate change.

Fishers repair fishing nets by the riverside (Balaram Sura Village, Bhola, Bangladesh).

Photo: Babul Hossen

5 FISHER PEOPLES' RESISTANCE AND GRASSROOTS SOLUTIONS

Across the 10 case studies, fisher peoples, collectors and coastal communities are not passive victims of climate change; they are on the frontlines, fiercely resisting false solutions imposed from above and advancing their own community-led and community governed, human rights-based strategies to confront the climate crisis.

Environmental Restoration and Protection

Fisher communities are taking direct action to protect fisher commons and their environment through community-led initiatives. These include tree plantation efforts to prevent erosion (Bangladesh), biological rest periods to address fish stock depletion (Senegal), youth-led promotion of sustainable fishing practices (Bangladesh), and the restoration of critical ecosystems such as mangroves (Ecuador, Senegal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand).[45] In Ecuador, fisher and gatherer communities, in collaboration with C-CONDEM, have restored more than 7,000 hectares of mangrove forests since 1992, defending their livelihoods and traditional practices while building a vital natural defense against climate change. In Thailand, communities restored over 320 hectares of mangroves in the 1990s and 2000s, and in 2024, they revived the initiative by registering the Community Mangrove Forest Project. Rejecting the carbon credit model, this project enables community-led management under traditional rules, restoring biodiversity beyond monoculture.

Community members restore mangroves in an uninhabited area (Las Manchas Islands, Ecuador).

Photo: Lider Gongora

Community Organization and Collective Action

Fisher peoples are strengthening their collective bargaining power through community organization and networking, with significant involvement of women (see more below). In Bangladesh, communities have formed associations for mutual support, with youth groups organizing food relief and financial support during ban periods. In addition, local organizations, cooperatives, youth clubs, and informal fisher networking groups have begun forming alliances to assert their rights and strengthen collective bargaining power. In Sri Lanka, fishers mobilize through meetings, protests, and petitions to resist harmful policies and false solutions, while in Belize, the erosion of homes and cemeteries served as catalytic events that galvanized collective action, demanding government actions. In Thailand, communities self-organized as early as 1990 in response to environmental damage and livelihood loss, adopting community rules for sustainable mangrove use and

banning destructive practices such as illegal logging and overharvesting. In Senegal, local collectives and associations – including CNPS - play a central role in strengthening resilience, defending rights, and advancing sustainable solutions.

Women as Guardians against Climate Change

Across regions, women are stepping into leadership roles, driving resistance efforts, and developing alternative strategies to safeguard livelihoods and rights. In Bangladesh, women have formed savings groups to help families cope during fishing bans and disasters, while in Indonesia, fisherwomen engage in daily acts of resistance by harvesting in flooded lands, organizing women's groups, and likewise creating independent savings accounts that provide empowerment, mutual support, and advocacy spaces. In Brazil, women have played a central role in organizing local food systems, strengthening community resilience. In Sri Lanka, women have taken prominent roles in some protests and campaigns, especially when fish drying spaces and home gardens were affected. Their resistance is not just about survival, it is about claiming agency in decisions that shape their future. In Senegal, women's fish processing groups defend their rights when fish drying spaces and home gardens are affected, and women-led cooperatives process and market cereal products to secure alternative income sources. In South Africa, women mussel harvesters mobilized after the April 2022 floods, demanding immediate support, infrastructure repairs, and recognition of customary rights, thereby publicly exposing state failures while advancing local solutions.

Women-led action in Ban Pred Nai: Calling to protect mangroves from carbon credit schemes (Ban Pred Nai, Thailand).

Photo: Asma Tisa

Knowledge Sharing and Advocacy

Communities are actively sharing knowledge to raise awareness about climate impact, and in doing so advocating for community-based solutions. In Kenya, fisher communities are engaged in participatory risk assessments, helping communities understand vulnerabilities and communicate climate challenges, while in Brazil, they share food and climate information during extreme events. Fisher communities in Sri Lanka use media to highlight the loss of fishing grounds, erosion, and saltwater intrusion and in Bangladesh, fisher community emphasizes the need for awareness campaigns to eliminate destructive fishing gear.

Based on their collective knowledge building, communities are engaging in advocacy to demand genuine climate solutions, legal recognition, and protection of livelihoods. In Sri Lanka, fishers in collaboration with NAFSO protest harmful policies like marine protected areas, submit petitions, use media, and lead mangrove restoration, with women taking prominent roles when local resources are threatened. In Brazil, in partnership with regional fisher movements and justice organizations, the community has documented their experiences, raised awareness, and demanded state accountability. Through testimonies and community assemblies, community members have emphasized that their participation must be included in any climate responses from the outset. In Senegal, fishers organized a 2022 protest against the construction of a new pier, highlighting issues like limited space due to coastal erosion. Ecuadorian fishers and gatherers mobilized to promote the Mangrove System Conservation Act and influence fisheries regulations. In Bangladesh, communities call for participatory planning, distribution of fisher ID cards, and government compensation during fishing bans. In South Africa, Masifundise amplifies fisher voices in national and regional climate dialogues, advocating for policies that recognize local knowledge and customary rights.

These community-driven responses represent genuine bottom-up climate solutions based on local and traditional knowledge that contrast sharply with false solutions imposed from outside and top-down, emphasizing local control, traditional knowledge, ecosystem restoration, and social justice rather than market-based mechanisms that prioritize corporate interests while further marginalize fisher peoples.

Fisher constructs a rock wall (Monkey River Village, Belize).

Photo: Dannette Young

RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENTS AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS – CLIMATE CHANGE AND HUMAN RIGHTS OF FISHER PEOPLES

Recognizing that fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities are among the most affected by the climate crisis and stressing the urgent need to implement real climate solutions advanced by fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities worldwide, the World Forum of Fisher Peoples and FIAN International urgently call on governments and international organizations to take the following actions. These demands are not only about protecting ecosystems, but also about safeguarding human rights, food sovereignty, and the very survival of fisher peoples and coastal communities in the face of the climate crisis - both now and in the future:

Human Rights–Based Climate Justice

- Recognize the vital contributions of fisher peoples as stewards of the worlds' waters and acknowledge their capacity to adapt to climate change and their crucial role in restoring, conserving, protecting and collectively managing local aquatic and coastal ecosystems. Fisher peoples are integral to people-centered food systems transformation;

- Implement immediate and long-term non-structural mitigation measures (e.g. river/lake/beach/bank nourishment, sand dune reconstruction and rehabilitation, coastal vegetation and sand bypassing) to address coastal and river erosion and related impacts;

- A rapid phase-out of fossil fuels, stringent regulation of destructive industrial fishing practices, and the elimination of agrotoxics and other pollutants that poison aquatic ecosystems. States must prioritize the regeneration of ecosystems and territories (including mangroves) through artisanal practices, Indigenous knowledge, and fisher peoples' conservation;

- Establish emergency response systems that respect fisher peoples' right to territories (land, water and fisheries) by anchoring disaster preparedness and recovery in their lands and waters, while integrating traditional knowledge and ecosystem-based protections identified by fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities;

- Develop participatory climate adaptation measures that strengthen community resilience over forced displacement or livelihood abandonment. Ensure that any climate-related resettlement of fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities is a last resort and carried out only through human rights–based, participatory processes that guarantee free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), safeguard territorial rights and governance over territories, and provide adequate support for housing, livelihoods, and cultural continuity. Communities must retain the possibility to return where feasible.

Recognize and Support Customary Rights of Fishers to Territories

- From rivers to ocean, formally recognize fisher peoples' right to territories (land, water and fisheries) over marine and coastal areas in national legal frameworks, grounded in international standards such as UNDROP, UNDRIP, the Tenure Guidelines, the SSF Guidelines, and CEDAW General Recommendation No. 34;

- Protect customary governance rights to fishing grounds as well as areas essential for fisher peoples to realize their RtFN and related human rights. Enact redistributive tenure policies that ensure broad, equitable and sustainable distribution of land, fisheries and other natural resources, giving due attention to fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities. Such policies should include measures to regain public-interest control over critical ecosystems (such as forests, mangroves, river shores and coastal lands, among others) and guarantee fisher peoples' sustainable use of these by fisher peoples and other small-scale food providers and rural/coastal communities;

- Ensure that any conservation initiatives (state or private) do not violate and expropriate fisher peoples' customary governance rights;

- Support fisher peoples' conservation initiatives that are fisher people-led and that help regenerate fish stocks without threatening their means of livelihoods and thus their human rights;

- Recognize and promote traditional fishing practices as real climate solutions rather than imposing external alternatives.

Ensure Meaningful Participation in Policy Making

- Ensure meaningful participation of fisher peoples in climate policy: Establish formal mechanisms that guarantee fisher peoples' organizations are represented in all stages of climate change policy and program development - from planning to implementation and monitoring - so that their perspectives, knowledge, and priorities are systematically incorporated, rather than treated as token participation;

- Strengthen decision-making processes that center local knowledge and customary governance rights and the traditional socio-cultural institutions;

- Provide adequate information and guarantee participation in policy and decision-making before developing, approving and implementing climate change policies and accompanying actions affecting fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities.

Recognize and Support Community-Led Fisheries Governance

- Legally recognize and support fisher peoples-led fishing governance systems that have proven effective in sustainable use;
- Legalize and recognize community governance models where fisher communities can actively monitor, protect, and sustainably use their resources.

Provide Adequate Compensation and Reparations

- Ensure adequate and timely compensation and reparations to secure lives, livelihoods and uphold human rights for communities disproportionately affected by climate change;
- Prioritize responses that allow fisher peoples to remain on their territories, lead dignified lives and remain as custodians of their oceans and rivers.

Implement Gender-Responsive Climate Policies

- Guarantee women's full inclusion in climate policies from planning to implementation efforts;
- Ensure access to training and capacity-building programs specifically designed for women from fisher peoples, collectors, and coastal communities;
- Support women-led food processing grassroots groups and cooperatives;
- Recognition of women's essential roles in climate resilience and customary governance over their territories at all levels.

1 This report refers to the term "fisher peoples" and coastal communities. The report, however, incorporates the understanding that fisher peoples are diverse in identity, gender, race, geographical origin, and united in their traditional way of life. There is no singular definition of fisher peoples. Depending on the geographical region and country, gender, cultures, and identities, different terms are used. These include ocean, water, mangrove, and/or fisher peoples; traditional fishers, fishermen, and fisherwomen; artisanal fishers, fishermen, and fisherwomen; men and women seafood, shell, and shell-fish collectors and gatherers; Indigenous Peoples fishers; coastal, marine, inland, and/or mangrove fishers; small-scale fishers, and other terms. See WFFP, *Political Resolution*, 8th General Assembly, Preamble.

2 UN Food and Agriculture Organization, *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture* (Rome: UN Food and Agriculture Organization, 2022), xvi.

3 World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), Input submitted for the Call for Inputs on the Ocean and Human Rights, in Human Rights Council, The Ocean and Human Rights: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment, Astrid Puentes Riaño, A/HRC/58/59*, December 31, 2024, https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2024/call-inputs-ocean-and-human-rights.

4 World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), *Political Resolution* (6.11), 8th General Assembly, November 20, 2024, https://wffp-web.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/WFFP.GA8_.RESOLUTIONS.20.NOV_.2024.pdf.

5 National member organizations and a supporter of WFFP that participated in the case studies include: Coastal Association for Social Transformation Trust (COAST Trust), Bangladesh; The Caribbean Network of Fisherfolk Organisation (CNFO), Belize; Movimento de Pescadores e Pescadoras Artesanais do Brasil (MPP), Brazil; Coordinadora Nacional para la Defensea del Ecosistema Manglar (C-CONDEM), Ecuador; Yayasan Konservasi Ekosistem Alam Nusantara (KIARA), Indonesia; El Molo Forum, Kenya; Collectif National des Pecheurs Artisanales (CNPA), Senegal; Masifundise, South Africa; National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO), Sri Lanka; Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF), Thailand.

6 For all case studies, visit WFFP website: https://wffp-web.org/wffp-case-studies/

7 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Geneva: IPCC, 2014), https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/syr/.

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9 Ibid., chap. 2, Terrestrial and Freshwater Ecosystems and Their Services.

10 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Impacts of Climate Change on the Effective Enjoyment of Human Rights," https://www.ohchr.org/en/climate-change/impacts-climate-change-effective-enjoyment-human-rights.

11 OHCHR, "Impact of Climate Change on the Right to Food," https://www.ohchr.org/en/climate-change/impact-climate-change-right-food.

12 OHCHR, *Climate Change and Human Rights* (Geneva: OHCHR, 2021).

13 The right to food is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 25(1), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, art. 11. Other instruments include the Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 24, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas. See OHCHR, *Impact of Climate Change on the Right to Food*, 7–9.

14 UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *General Comment No. 12: The Right to Adequate Food* (Art. 11), UN Doc. E/C.12/1999/5 (1999), para. 8, https://docs.un.org/en/E/C.12/1999/5

15 FAO, *Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication* (Rome: FAO, 2015), paras. 5.4–5.6.

16 United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Michael Fakhri (A/HRC/55/49, January 8, 2024), para 1, https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/55/49.

17 Endalew Lijalem Enyew, *The Interaction Between International Human Rights Law and the Law of the Sea: Indigenous Peoples, Marine Spaces and Resources and International Law* (New York: 2024), 6.
From a comparative perspective, the study found that "coastal Indigenous peoples eat nearly four times more seafood per capita than the global average [74 kilograms versus 19 kilograms per capita/year], and about 15 times more per capita than non-Indigenous peoples in their countries."

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20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, *People Centred Assessment of the Implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication. Report by Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka* (October 2023), 18–19, https://www.foodsovereignty.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/SSF-Guidelines_Report_AP_web.pdf; see also https://happynegombo.com/padu-system-negombo-sri-lankan/.

23 Ubuntu Wildlife Trust, "Let's Talk About 700 Years of Traditional Fishing at Kosi Bay," https://www.ubuntuwildlifetrust.com/2023/06/09/lets-talk-about-700-years-of-traditional-fishing-at-kosi-bay/; Masifundise, *Vissernet News* (June 2011), https://www.masifundise.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/vissernet-eng-news-3-final.pdf.

24 Antonio Carlos Diegues, "Traditional Fisheries Knowledge and Social Appropriation of Marine Resources in Brazil," paper presented at MARE Conference: People and the Sea, Amsterdam, Aug./Sept. 2001, 11, https://nupaub.fflch.usp.br/sites/nupaub.fflch.usp.br/files/amsten%20(4).pdf.

25 See UN Declaration of the Rights os Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), Art. 5.1, 17.1, 17.3. In addition, UNDROP recognizes that peasants and other rural peoples (or fishers) have the right to have access to and to use in a sustainable manner the natural resources present in their communities" (Art.5.1) as well as the right to land..."including the right to have access to, sustainably use and manage land and the water bodies, coastal seas, fisheries, pastures and forests therein, to achieve an adequate standard of living, to have a place to live in security, peace and dignity and to develop their cultures (Art 17.1) states shall recognize and protect the natural commons and their related systems of collective use and management" (Art.17.3).

26 WFFP, Input on the Implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants. submission for Call for Input: Special Procedures (Working Group on Peasants).

27 Enyew, *Indigenous Peoples, Marine Space and Resources, and International Law*, 11.

28 The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) recognizes the right of Indigenous Peoples to maintain and strengthen their spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or used lands, territories, waters, and resources, and to own, use, develop, and control them (Articles 25–26). Similarly, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) affirms the rights of peasants and rural communities to land, water, fisheries, and other resources that they need to achieve an adequate standard of living, and obliges states to respect and protect customary tenure systems (Articles 5, 17). ILO Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples explicitly recognize Indigenous Peoples' rights to the lands, territories, and resources they traditionally occupy or use, and require states to recognize and protect these rights (Articles 13-19). CEDAW General Recommendation 34 recognizes 'rural women's rights to land, natural resources, including water, seeds, forestry, as well as fisheries, as fundamental human rights' (para. 56).

29 WFFP, *Food Sovereignty Report for Internal Use*, 2019, https://wffp-web.org/2019_wffp-food-sovereignty-report-for-internal-use/.

30 International Court of Justice, *Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change* (July 2025), https://www.icj-cij.org/case/187; see also https://blog.ucs.org/delta-merner/five-reasons-why-the-icj-climate-advisory-opinion-matters/.

31 UNDROP Art. 18.3: "States shall comply with their respective international obligations to combat climate change. Peasants and other people working in rural areas have the right to contribute to the design and implementation of national and local climate change adaptation and mitigation policies, including through the use of practices and traditional knowledge."

32 German Institute for Human Rights and CIEL, *Human Rights in Practice: Climate Change and Human Rights – The Contributions of National Human Rights Institutions. A Handbook*, 17–18, https://www.institut-fuer-menschenrechte.de/fileadmin/Redaktion/Publikationen/Weitere_Publikationen/Human_Rights_in_Practice_Climate_Change_and_Human_Rights.pdf

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35 Ibid.

36 Recognition of tenure and customary rights is central to ensuring just processes for adaption, planned relocation, compensation and restation. FAO, *Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security*, First revision (Rome: FAO, 2022), https://doi.org/10.4060/i2801e; FAO, Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (Rome: FAO, 2015), https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/edfffbfc-81e5-4208-a36f-334ff81ac10f/content

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38 Conservation International, “Conservation International and XpertSea Launch Climate-Smart Shrimp Regenerative Farming Pilot in Ecuador,” https://www.conservation.org/press-releases/2023/05/25/conservation-international-and-xpertsea-launch-climate-smart-shrimp-regenerative-farming-pilot-in-ecuador?utm.

39 Case Study, Sri Lanka.

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41 Case Study, Senegal.

42 “President Prabowo Reiterates Commitment to Launch Java Sea Wall Project,” https://setkab.go.id/en/president-prabowo-reiterates--commitment-to-launch-java-sea-wall-project/.

43 Reuters, “Indonesia Invites Foreign Stakes in $80 Billion Seawall to Shield Coasts from Floods,” June 12, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/cop/indonesia-invites-foreign-stakes-80-bln-seawall-shield-coasts-floods-2025-06-12/.

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45 A further example is the collaboration between the local fisher community in Belize and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to install “geotubes” in front of the most vulnerable properties. This initiative reflects the community’s sustained advocacy efforts, yet it remains profoundly inadequate.