

Climate Change and Indigenous Rights in Papua New Guinea

Team Asia – May 30th, 2025



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CCDA	Climate Change and Development Authority
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IOM	International Organization for Migration
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PNG	Papua New Guinea
REDD	Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation
REDD+	Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, plus conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks
UN	United Nations
UNDCO	United Nations Development Coordination Office
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States Dollar
WHO	World Health Organization

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is one of the most pressing global challenges of the 21st century. Beyond an environmental crisis, it is also a complex socio-economic and political issue that deeply affects populations around the world in diverse and often unequal ways. Rising global temperatures, shifting weather patterns, and an increase in the frequency and intensity of natural disasters have profound consequences for human health, food security, access to water, and migration patterns (United Nations, n.d.; WHO, n.d.; Omolere, 2025). These changes are not just scientific phenomena; they also raise fundamental questions about the protection of human rights.

Among the rights most impacted by climate change are the rights to life, health, food, water and sanitation, housing, self-determination, culture, and development (OHCHR, n.d.). For many communities, particularly those with deep ties to their land and ecosystems, the erosion of environmental stability is directly linked to the erosion of cultural identity and autonomy (Harvey, 2019; Cosentino, 2016). In this light, climate change is both a threat multiplier and a human rights issue.

This report will provide an overview of the climate-related challenges faced by Papua New Guinea (PNG), one of the world's most environmentally and culturally diverse countries (Mamo, 2025). While climate change affects entire populations, Indigenous communities, due to their distinct cultural practices and ways of life, face distinct and compounded vulnerabilities. Consequently, this report will explore these dynamics and assess how climate change contributes to the violation of both global and locally-recognised human rights.

1. PAPUA NEW GUINEA



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1.1 Overview

Papua New Guinea is the largest country in the Pacific region in terms of both geography and population (UNDP, n.d.). It is home to the third largest rainforest in the world and harbours approximately seven percent of the planet's biodiversity (One Earth, 2024). The country is predominantly made up of tropical rainforest climate zones, with smaller areas in the south-west experiencing tropical monsoon and tropical savanna climates (Climate Centre, 2024). Overall, the country is one of the wettest in the world and experiences a hot, humid, and tropical climate, with a wet season from December to March and a dry season from June to September (Climate Centre, 2024).

Papua New Guinea is rich in natural resources such as gold, copper, silver, oil, gas, and timber, on which its economy heavily relies (Mamo, 2025; IOM, 2025; UNDP, n.d.). However, approximately 85 percent of the population depends on subsistence agriculture for their livelihoods (UNDCO, 2024; UNDP, n.d.). Development remains uneven: 39.9 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, and only 20.9 percent has access to electricity (Mamo, 2025). Despite its rich resources, the country faces complex challenges including corruption, environmental degradation, and violence (Mamo, 2025).

1.2 The impacts of Climate Change

Like many Pacific nations, PNG is severely affected by climate-related events and disasters, putting approximately five million people at risk of hunger, poverty, and disease due to weather-related droughts (One Earth, 2024). The country is vulnerable to a wide range of hazards, including floods, droughts, earthquakes, volcanic activity, tsunamis, and sea-level rise. These hazards are expected to become more frequent and intense due to climate change (World Bank Climate Change Knowledge Portal, 2021). Increases in minimum and maximum temperatures are expected to outpace average temperature increases, which will likely amplify threats to human health and ecosystems (World Bank Group, 2021). Indeed, PNG's environment is highly sensitive to both natural and human-induced changes, and its ecosystems, although they have been resilient in the past, may struggle to adapt to rapid climate shifts and population growth (UNDP, n.d.; IOM, 2025). Moreover, the effects of hazards go beyond immediate destruction and may result in long-term consequences (IOM, 2025; IOM, 2024). Communities across Papua New Guinea already perceive and experience the impacts of climate change (Wildlife Conservation Society, n.d.).

The UN Resident Coordinator in PNG, Richard Howard, has highlighted the interconnected challenges of biodiversity loss, climate change, and sustainable development in the country (UNDCO, 2024).

1.3 Humanitarian Context

IOM's Papua New Guinea Crisis Response Plan, last updated in June 2024, reports that 96,000 people are currently targeted for humanitarian assistance (IOM, 2025). As of December 2024, funding needs of USD 21 million are essential for reducing exposure to natural hazards, strengthening community resilience, and supporting climate adaptation initiatives (IOM, 2025).

1.4 Indigenous Communities

The people of Papua New Guinea are the original inhabitants of the land, maintaining distinct cultures, histories, and identities. Their connection to the land is spiritual and foundational to their sense of self and community. With over 840 languages spoken, Papua New Guinea is considered the most culturally and linguistically diverse country in the world (Mamo, 2025).

Climate change represents a particular threat to indigenous communities by disrupting traditional livelihoods and access to ancestral lands, placing their cultural practices and ways of living at particular risk from climate-related impacts (Harvey, 2019; Cosentino, 2016). Moreover, "multiple persistent threats remain relevant for Indigenous communities in PNG, including land disputes, resource extraction, limited access to services, discrimination, and violence. These interconnected issues have a profound intergenerational impact" (Mamo, 2025).

2. INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT

2.1 Leaving a Home

Internal displacement in Papua New Guinea is driven largely by natural hazards and conflict. Between 2008 and 2024, an estimated 327,000 people were displaced due to disasters, with an additional 84,000 displaced as a result of conflict and violence (IDMC, n.d.). In 2024, 71 percent of displacements, amounting to 21,878 individuals, were caused by natural hazards (with floods as the primary driver of displacement), while 29 percent, or 9,092 individuals, resulted from conflict, though climate-related displacement is expected to rise in the coming years (IOM, 2025; Cazabat, 2022).

Displacement is also linked to a history of intercommunal violence fuelled by disputes over customary land ownership, ethnic and cultural rivalries, as well as criminal violence driven by poverty and unemployment (Cazabat, 2022). In this light, violence in the region may see an increase as individuals' livelihoods become altered due to climate-related displacements.

For many displaced individuals, the loss of home often results in extended stays in makeshift shelters, increased insecurity, and significant impacts on mental health (O'Connor & Sydney, 2021; Schwerdtle et al., 2018; IOM, 2025).

2.2 Indigenous Homes

Displacement carries particular implications for Indigenous communities, who often lose customary land rights, access to traditional food sources, and sacred sites integral to their cultural and spiritual identity (Accountability Framework, 2019). Customary land rights in PNG refer to the collective ownership of land by clans and communities rather than by individuals. Approximately 97 percent of land in the country is under customary tenure (Gavman Portal PNG, n.d.). These rights play a key role in preserving cultural heritage and identity. However, there exists legal ambiguity between customary tenure and statutory land law, with the latter being government-recognised legal frameworks governing land ownership (Independent State of Papua New Guinea, 1996). This uncertainty contributes to land-related conflict and increases vulnerability to climate-induced displacement. The lack of harmonisation between these systems often means that customary claims are not fully recognised or protected in legal processes (Oxfam Australia, 2008). The loss of ancestral land through climate-related displacement, beyond the loss of physical shelter, threatens cultural continuity and traditional livelihoods that are closely tied to the environment.

3. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

3.1 Costs of Displacement

Disaster displacement in Papua New Guinea carries substantial socio-economic costs that extend far beyond the immediate event. Indeed, it affects multiple dimensions of life, including housing conditions, health, education, security, social relationships, and the surrounding environment (Cazabat, 2022). When individuals lose their homes, they not only lose their capital and assets but also face new and significant expenses associated with relocation. These financial burdens often exacerbate existing poverty and vulnerability. Many displaced persons are forced to live in makeshift shelters, which often lack basic amenities and security (Cazabat, 2022; O'Connor & Sydney, 2021). The effects of internal displacement are often slow to emerge and challenging to quantify, as the social and economic consequences unfold over extended periods (Cazabat, 2022). This complexity makes it difficult to fully grasp the scope of displacement's impact and to implement effective responses. In rural areas, where people are more likely to depend directly on land and natural resources, displacement can result in the loss of livelihoods and deeper social disruption. Meanwhile, sudden and slow-onset disasters are contributing to increased rural–urban migration, limiting rural populations' subsistence farming-based livelihoods and contributing to a surge of displacement in urban areas (Climate Centre, 2024; Cazabat, 2022), which is evidenced in other contexts to increase conditions of marginalisations and vulnerability for the displaced peoples (Desai, 2018).

3.2 Climate-related Damages

The economic damage caused by disasters in Papua New Guinea is significant, with annual costs continuing to rise. Without actions to mitigate and adapt, the costs of climate change may reach significant heights, for instance, sea level rise could cost 15 percent of GDP by 2100 in a high emissions scenario (Suphachalasai et al., 2025).

4. HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

Climate change poses a complex threat to public health in Papua New Guinea. Its effects on food systems, water security, disease transmission, and mental well-being are especially harmful in the context of displacement (Climate Centre, 2024; World Bank Group, 2021; Savage et al., 2020).

4.1 Nutrition

A significant portion of the population relies on subsistence or semi-subsistence agriculture. However, this way of life is increasingly vulnerable due to issues such as unpredictable rainfall, soil degradation, the loss of arable land, and pressures on fisheries, resulting in negative consequences for food security and income (USAID, 2024; ICRC, 2019; Climate Centre, 2024; Barange et al., 2018). As traditional food systems deteriorate, communities turn to imported foods, which could be less nutritious (Climate Centre, 2024). This shift may be related to potential undernutrition and diet-related diseases (Climate Centre, 2024; Savage et al., 2020).

Moreover, for Papua New Guinea's communities, the climate-related nutrition and agricultural pattern shifts may represent a crucial step away from traditional ways of life (Savage et al., 2020).

4.2 Water and Hygiene

Papua New Guinea receives significant annual rainfall, particularly due to its steep mountain ranges and generally abundant rainfall levels (Climate Centre, 2024). However, access to clean water is not guaranteed to all: climate change-related droughts and coastal flooding reduce water availability, while poor infrastructure in some areas heightens vulnerability (Climate Centre, 2024; Oxfam, 2022; Columbia Law School, 2019). Evidently, a lack of access to appropriate water and sanitation exacerbates vulnerabilities and adversely affects the health and hygiene of many Papuans (O'Connor & Sydney, 2021).

4.3 Diseases

Rising temperatures and changing rainfall patterns are enabling the spread of infectious diseases, such as the increased prevalence of Malaria, which is projected to rise as a result of these climatic conditions (USAID, 2024; Imai et al., 2016; Park et al., 2016). Additionally, the increased spread of waterborne diseases also represents a significant health concern for Papua New Guineans (Climate Centre, 2024).

4.4 Mental Health

The psychological toll of climate change is substantial (Climate Centre, 2024; Schwerdtle et al., 2018). Forced relocation due to rising seas or other environmental changes often brings anxiety, grief, and trauma.

5. THREATS TO INDIGENOUS RIGHTS



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5.1 Legal Framework and the Protection of Indigenous Rights

Although Papua New Guinea's government has signed multiple international treaties, it has not ratified the 2007 UNDRIP nor the International Labour Organisation's Convention Number 169 (1989), which recognised the rights of indigenous and tribal individuals (Mamo, 2025).

On the other hand, the government introduced amendments to the 1996 Land Act aimed at providing better protection for Indigenous land rights. These revisions have been welcomed by many Indigenous communities due to their more robust legal mechanisms to tackle land grabbing and to guarantee that Indigenous communities are genuinely consulted through processes ensuring their Free, Prior, and Informed Consent before any land-use decisions are made (Mamo, 2025). Moreover, through new regulations, further control of the

extractive industries is implemented by ensuring that operations in Indigenous territories must respect environmental regulations and cooperate with Indigenous communities. The implementation of the legal framework is perceived as necessary and an improvement to preserve and treasure the environment and the cultural heritage of indigenous communities (Mamo, 2025).

5.2 Threatening Indigenous Ways

Climate change is a significant threat to the livelihoods of Indigenous communities, disproportionately affecting the most economically vulnerable groups (World Bank Group, 2021). The traditional ways of life of the peoples are threatened by the colliding and relentless forces of climate change, violence, and conflict (UNDP, 2024).

These three major threats to indigenous Papua New Guineans are deeply intertwined, functioning as a threat multiplier. Climate change increases the frequency and intensity of disasters and contributes to resource scarcity, poverty, gender inequality, social exclusion, and population growth. These effects can lead to land disputes, displacements, and potential violent conflicts (UNDP, 2024). In the face of great climate catastrophes and their consequences, the protection of the rights of individual communities may not be first on the agenda.

In other words, climate change is directly threatening Indigenous systems such as land rights and local governance, and this must be understood as a human rights issue, impacting multiple interconnected rights. affecting intertwined human rights.

5.3 Strong Youth

Indigenous youth have played a crucial role in driving innovation and change within their communities through various initiatives, notably The Youth Empowerment Project, which aims to empower youth from remote communities through education and vocational training (Mamo, 2025). “This initiative has helped bridge the gap between traditional knowledge and modern skills, enabling youth to contribute more effectively to their communities while also pursuing personal development” (Mamo, 2025).

Various other initiatives and NGOs have also played instrumental roles in empowering indigenous youth. “Indigenous youth are the bridge between past (ancestors) and future generations. If the youth do not obtain knowledge from their elders, then it will end with the end of the elders” (Mamo, 2025).

6. AGAINST ALL ODDS: WOMEN AT THE FRONT OF THE BATTLE

6.1 Gender Inequalities

Papua New Guinea ranks among the lowest countries in the world on gender equality indicators, placed 169th out of 170 countries in 2021, according to the Gender Inequality Index (UNDP, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2021). Moreover, gender-based violence remains pervasive, with two out of every three women experiencing it during their lifetime (UNDP, 2024).

Climate change further amplifies existing gender disparities, and its consequences and impacts are not gender neutral. Women and children are often among the most vulnerable as a result of structural gender inequalities, including women's limited access to assets, land, and credit, which restrict their ability to adapt to climate-related impacts (World Bank Group, 2021). Additionally, the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, exclusion from decision-making processes, and a lack of sex-disaggregated data hamper the formulation of inclusive and effective policies (World Bank Group, 2021).

6.2 The Transformative Power of Women

Despite these challenges, women in Papua New Guinea have emerged as powerful agents of change. Women serve as keepers, treasures, and torchbearers of traditional knowledge and cultural practices. They therefore play an essential role in both preserving heritage and advancing gender rights and equality (Mamo, 2025; UNDP, 2024).

Women are often the primary carers responsible for securing food, water, and energy for their households and communities, but growing threats make the task increasingly difficult (UNDP, 2024).

Many have stepped into leadership roles, facilitating peace, mitigating climate-related risks, and fostering reconciliation within conflict-affected regions (UNDP, 2024). Notably, in provinces like Hela and the Southern Highlands, women have demonstrated remarkable agency and resilience, navigating and tackling impacts of climate change, conflict, and entrenched gender inequalities (UNDP, 2024). Arguably, their transformative leadership not only protects communities but also paves the way for more inclusive and sustainable futures.

7. FACING THE CHALLENGE

7.1 Legal framework and Government Initiatives

Papua New Guinea has established a broad legal and policy framework to address climate change, with a focus on supporting vulnerable and Indigenous communities. It has committed to key international agreements such as the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement, and updated its Nationally Determined Contribution in 2020 to reflect greater ambition (USAID, 2024). National strategies like the PNG Vision 2050 and the National Adaptation Plan aim to mainstream climate adaptation across key sectors, while the Climate Change and Development Authority (CCDA) coordinates implementation (USAID, 2024).

The efforts led by the CCDA have been criticised for lacking coordination and clarity regarding responsibilities across departments. Other governmental bodies have inadequately integrated climate action into their respective sectors, limiting the effectiveness of national policies (Bingeding, 2018).

Papua New Guinea has been recognised internationally for its leadership on REDD and REDD+ (Bingeding, 2018). It has played an active role in global climate negotiations and contributed to international discussions on forest protection and sustainable development. However, several challenges hinder the translation of this engagement into tangible outcomes. Among the shortcomings, REDD projects fail to reach additionality, meaning they often do not result in real, measurable emission reductions beyond business-as-usual scenarios (Bingeding, 2018). The Carbon Market Watch (2023) has also underlined methodological flaws in the calculation of carbon credits, which have led to overestimations of the results. Moreover, the transparency and accountability of REDD+ have been widely debated, particularly regarding information sharing among all stakeholder groups (Aryal et al., 2024; Poudyal et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2019; Cadman et al., 2018).

Challenges to the implementation highlight the complexity of addressing climate change at both international and national levels. Despite commendable efforts, the disconnect between international commitments and local realities continues to challenge Papua New Guinea's climate agenda.

7.2 Recommendations

Tackling the impacts of climate change requires comprehensive approaches through both adaptation and mitigation (Wildlife Conservation Society, n.d.).

Climate adaptation refers to helping communities adjust to the effects of climate change. This includes local planning, awareness efforts, better infrastructure like water tanks and sanitation, coastal defences such as seawalls and mangroves, and climate-resilient agriculture (Wildlife Conservation Society, n.d.).

Climate mitigation means reducing greenhouse gas emissions. In Papua New Guinea, the effort focuses on deforestation, a major emissions source. REDD+ projects aim to slow carbon release while providing benefits to forest communities (Wildlife Conservation Society, n.d.).

7.3 Initiatives and Projects

Alongside government action, several community-led initiatives play an instrumental role in enhancing resilience. Their contributions support adaptation and provide critical infrastructure and training to help vulnerable populations cope with the effects of climate change (One Earth, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Papua New Guinea stands at a critical crossroads where the impacts of climate change collide with deeply rooted cultural traditions, biodiversity, and human rights. The country's Indigenous communities, who hold a profound spiritual and physical connection to the land, face the dual threat of environmental degradation and a menace to their rights and identities. Climate change in PNG is not merely an environmental issue; it is a human rights issue.

Yet, amidst these challenges, there lies an opportunity. Indigenous knowledge systems, long undervalued, should be recognised for their vital contributions to climate adaptation and ecological stewardship, as they embody traditional ways (West et al., 2024). Women and youth, particularly within Indigenous communities, are emerging as powerful change-makers, shaping local responses and redefining leadership in climate action.

To ensure a just and sustainable future, climate policies and actions in PNG must be grounded in a comprehensive approach that is representative of the voices, rights, and traditions needed to mitigate and adapt to climate change with solutions rooted in the past and the present. Moreover, community-led strategies and initiatives should be encouraged and supported. National and international frameworks must move beyond symbolic commitments and deliver tangible outcomes that empower Indigenous peoples as equal partners in climate governance.

By placing Indigenous rights and resilience at the heart of its climate response, Papua New Guinea can chart a path forward that is not only environmentally sustainable but also socially just and culturally rooted.

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