

UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE-INDUCED CULTURAL and NON-ECONOMIC LOSS

SCOPING PAPER



Introduction



The impacts of climate change are causing significant losses and damages to human and ecological systems around the world. Addressing these losses and damages is an increasingly important priority on the local and national level as well as in the context of global policy and action under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).



While some of the impacts of climate change can potentially be reversed (for example, through reconstruction, recovery, restoration, rehabilitation, or replacement), others damage or destroy **irreplaceable values and assets**. In particular, this is the case for non-economic loss (and damage) (NEL/NELD), which can affect individuals, societies, and the natural environment.



This scoping paper has been developed as part of SLYCAN Trust's work programme on loss and damage. Detailed references and sources will be available as part of upcoming project outputs or upon request.

Non-economic losses to individuals



Individuals can experience NELD in many ways, for example, related to their health, nutrition, forced human mobility, or loss of life.



Non-economic losses to societies



On the society or community level, NELD can include loss of territory, indigenous knowledge, and cultural heritage and identity.



Non-economic losses to the environment



Degradation or destruction of ecosystems can be considered a form of NELD as well, resulting in loss of biodiversity, available resources, and ecosystem services.



This scoping paper will examine **cultural loss as a sub-type of NELD**, including its different types, elements, implications, and potential ways that it can be addressed, including through documentation, preservation, and compensation.

I. The concept of non-economic and cultural loss and damage

The concept of loss and damage (L&D) can refer to both the discussion item under the UNFCCC and to the observed or projected impacts of climate change causing harm to human and ecological systems, especially those impacts that exceed the soft and/or hard limits of adaptation. (IPCC WGII Sixth Assessment Report)

L&D has emerged as an **important thematic area in the UNFCCC negotiation process**, leading to the establishment of the Warsaw International Mechanism (WIM) at COP19 in 2013, the inclusion of a dedicated article on L&D in the Paris Agreement in 2015, and subsequent developments such as those on the Santiago Network and on funding arrangements for L&D. **Key areas of focus related to L&D** under the WIM include comprehensive risk management, slow-onset events, non-economic losses, human mobility, and action and support.

Economic losses and damages are those that concern resources, goods, services, and assets which are commonly traded in markets and have a monetary value attached to them. In contrast, **non-economic losses** are often hard to value and quantify, requiring a range of assessment and evaluation techniques with multiple criteria and non-quantitative elements.

Like economic L&D, **NELD can be caused directly or indirectly by both sudden- and slow-onset events**. In many cases, distinctions between the forms of L&D may also be blurred or coincide, for example, when ecosystem services feed into the market economy or when cultural loss affects economic sectors such as tourism.



Cultural losses are those manifestations of NELD that directly affect components of the culture of a community, group, or society, such as their traditions, forms of knowledge, social fabric, or places of sanctuary or significance. Cultural loss can erode the features and capacities of human communities and deeply affect their ontological foundations and security.

Cultural losses are part of the total costs of climate change (in addition to the loss of property, assets, infrastructure, or livelihoods) and can severely affect human wellbeing and prosperity. **They are highly context-specific and incommensurable**, meaning that they arise from unique geographic and sociocultural conditions and cannot be replaced with each other.

What is culture?

Culture refers to the behaviours, beliefs, values, attitudes, ideas, symbols, traditions, customs, rituals, patterns, and artifacts shared by a group of people. It is the result of past experiences while simultaneously informing and shaping current and future actions. Culture is generally transmitted from generation to generation and, in its sum, constitutes a distinct way of life with associated modes of communication, social roles, and hierarchies.

II. A typology of cultural loss

Arts and crafts



Traditional arts and handicrafts as well as methods of production and livelihood practices can be severely impacted by climate change. For example, raw materials and ingredients can become scarce or unavailable, and the ability to create traditional objects (such as textiles, masks, or pottery) might get lost as artisans are forced to shift to other livelihoods or move away.

Customs, traditions, knowledge, and practices



Climate change can sever intergenerational bonds, split up communities, and force people to adopt new livelihoods, leading to a loss of customs, traditions, rituals, ceremonies, knowledge, and practices. For example, this can include the loss of: local, traditional, and Indigenous knowledge; livelihood practices; ecosystem knowledge; conservation and stewardship practices; food recipes; or weather prediction.

Languages



When climate change causes human mobility or forces communities to change their way of life, it can also threaten the loss of Indigenous or local languages and dialects, of words and entire vocabularies.

Mental and psychosocial health



Both cultural loss and the fear of cultural and other L&D can impact individual or communal mental and psycho-social health. This can lead to a multitude of negative effects such as worry, anxiety, sadness; trauma, loss of sense of safety and stability, breakdown of trust, or substance abuse.

Social and community cohesion



Cultural capital and social cohesion form an important foundation for the socioeconomic development, climate resilience, and identity of households and communities. The disintegration of this foundation through recurring losses or human mobility heightens future vulnerabilities, deteriorates development gains, and redirects available resources and capacities.

Sense of place and tangible cultural heritage



Land, landscapes, and territory have not only physical (geographic, ecological, climate-related) features but also holds cultural significance and can fulfill important functions, including as refuge, sanctuary, or meeting place. Territory and tangible cultural heritage—such as archeological sites, traditional or vernacular architecture, artifacts, or cultural and communal spaces—can be affected by climate change in various ways. Temperature increase, sea level rise, and extreme weather events have the potential to cause deterioration, structural damage, or outright destruction of tangible cultural heritage.

III. Addressing cultural loss

Cultural loss sits at the intersection of multiple human systems, including healthcare, education, social protection, performing arts, creative industries, and trade. Addressing cultural loss in just and equitable ways is a complex challenge that needs to take into account local discourses as well as agency, dignity, and self-determination of affected groups and communities.

Several **avenues for potential actions to address cultural loss** can be identified based on research and case studies, including the following:

Documentation

Assessing cultural loss and valuating intrinsic and instrumental aspects of culture can feed into L&D negotiations and enhance evidence-based support.

Preservation

Preserving cultural values through performing arts, artwork, memorialization, or memory culture can reduce losses and provide a form of support.

Compensation

Finance and other means of support (e.g., psycho-social) can provide a degree of compensation and help those affected by cultural loss to cope more successfully and increase their resilience.

Any measures also need to account for inter-sectional vulnerabilities, such as those related to gender, age, education, disability, ethnicity, marginalization, or economic status.



Preventing and mitigating cultural loss is a key priority, as the actions outlined above cannot fully rectify or undo losses that have already taken place. Therefore, providing effective assistance and support to vulnerable frontline communities and groups is crucial, especially in the face of imminent or projected cultural losses.

Cultural loss is an emerging field of study with critical implications for those affected but also for policymakers, negotiators, practitioners, and implementing organizations. Going forward, it will be important to enhance ways to assess and value cultural loss, provide effective and inclusive support, and build on interlinkages between culture, livelihoods, risk management, adaptive capacities, resilience, development processes, and ecosystem conservation on all levels and under different processes.

Organizational profile

SLYCAN Trust is an internationally recognized non-profit think tank working on climate change, sustainable development, biodiversity and ecosystem conservation, animal welfare, and social justice including gender and youth empowerment. Our work spans the national, regional, and global level from policy analysis and evidence-based research to on-the-ground implementation. For more information, please visit our [homepage](#) or the [Adaptation & Resilience Knowledge Hub](#).