

Confronting the Irreplaceable

Priority Actions for Responding to NELs

The Warsaw International Mechanism for
LOSS AND DAMAGE
Executive Committee

“Our loved ones who have passed away, when we bury them, we say ‘sili vakarua’ (‘bath twice’) because one is the bath before they are put in the coffin, and they bath again after they are buried as the waves come in and enter the new burial site. This is just traumatizing for us...” – Resident of Togoru Settlement, Fiji

Climate change is not an abstract threat. Slow onset processes and extreme weather events are destroying homes and livelihoods, degrading ecosystems, severing relationships between people and nature, and obliterating cultural and natural heritage. These are non-economic losses (NELs): profound, sometimes irreversible harms that are difficult to capture in monetary terms but that fundamentally affect people’s lives, their histories, and their futures.

Source: *Non-economic losses: Featuring loss of territory and habitability, ecosystem services and biodiversity, and cultural heritage.* Technical paper. UNFCCC, 2024.



Loss of Territory and Habitability

Sea-level rise, desertification, glacial retreat, coastal erosion, and related hazards are driving the loss of land, both physically and in its ability to sustain life. Loss of territory refers to the disappearance of physical land from the jurisdiction and use of communities, while loss of habitability concerns land that remains but is less able to reliably support human life. These forms of loss affect well-being, identity, cultural heritage, social cohesion, and biodiversity and ecosystem services.

Loss of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services

Climate change is reshaping ecosystems, altering their composition, structure, and function. As biodiversity declines and ecosystems degrade, essential services such as food and freshwater provision, climate regulation, hazard mitigation, soil formation, and cultural meaning can become eroded. These losses can cascade across socio-ecological systems: climate-risk exposure rises, basic needs shrink, livelihoods falter, and health and well-being deteriorate.

Interlinkages and Cascading Impacts

NELs rarely occur in isolation. Loss of ecosystems can reduce habitability, increasing pressures that may lead to relocation and sever cultural ties. The erosion of cultural heritage can undermine community capacity to steward ecosystems, accelerating environmental decline. These intertwined losses compound harm and deepen inequalities across generations. Effective responses must therefore be integrated, locally led, rights-based, coherent across sectors and scales, and attuned to the complex ways climate change disrupts lives, landscapes, and legacies.

NELs are not peripheral. Recognizing and supporting responses to these losses is important for building resilience, advancing equity, and securing sustainable futures.

Loss of Cultural Heritage

The erosion of cultural heritage in all its forms – from archaeological sites and architectural marvels to historic cities, cultural landscapes, artifacts, living heritage elements, and underwater heritage – is resulting in the loss of distinctive forms as well as accumulated knowledge, skills, livelihoods, governance systems, innovation, food and water security, and resilience. These losses often overlap and have impacts at various scales, from local communities to the global level, depending on the value of the heritage.

Eight Priority Actions for Addressing NELs

1. Recognize that biodiversity and ecosystem services, territory and habitability, and cultural heritage are increasingly exposed to climate impacts while also serving as foundations of resilience 🏠 🌳 🌊
2. Strengthen coordination across sectors and scales 🏠 🌍 🔄
3. Ensure responses are locally led and community-centred 💰 🌍 🏠
4. Invest in nature- and ecosystem-based solutions 🏠 🌍 🌳

5. Support context-dependent, rights-based approaches to planned relocation 🏠 💰 🔄
6. Safeguard and mobilize cultural heritage as part of climate action 🏠 🔄 🏠
7. Expand monitoring, data, and diverse knowledge systems 🏠 🏠 🔄
8. Share knowledge and build capacities to understand and respond to NELs 🌍 🔄 🏠

Target Audience Key

- 🏠 National, Subnational, Local Governments – policy, planning, land, environment, and cultural heritage authorities
- 💰 Donors and FRLD – funders shaping funding decisions, windows, and instruments
- 🌍 Implementing Agencies – entities delivering programmes and providing technical support
- 🔄 Indigenous Peoples & Local Communities – rights-holders and knowledge-holders leading locally grounded responses
- 🏠 Research Institutions – data, monitoring, and knowledge-system management