

# Pacific Islands: Human Rights Learning and Integration into Nature-based Solutions for Climate Change Adaptation

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**I**N 2020, the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) partnered with the Kiwa Initiative, a regional mechanism supporting easier access to funding for climate change adaptation and biodiversity conservation for Pacific Island countries and territories. The objective of this partnership is to support the development of Kiwa regional projects and strengthen the capacity of practitioners to implement rights-based, gender-sensitive and socially inclusive nature-based solutions.<sup>1</sup> But what does this look like in practice? What does that imply for Nature-based Solutions (NbS) practitioners in Pacific Islands? Trying to answer these questions was the starting point of a fruitful collaboration between SPREP and human rights and gender experts. Building on this initial effort, regional partners and recipients of Kiwa Initiative grants from across the Pacific Island region embarked on a collective learning journey towards understanding and integrating human rights, including gender equity, disability and social inclusion in nature-based solutions, and more broadly in the environment and development sectors.

## Human Rights, Environment and Climate Change

As the impacts of climate change intensify, the protection of human rights becomes increasingly critical in the Pacific Islands, where communities rely heavily on natural ecosystems for their livelihood and cultural identity. Through NbS, interventions like the Kiwa Initiative are paving the way for climate-resilient futures that prioritize both environmental sustainability and the safeguarding of human rights.

The Fifth Session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-5) resolution formally adopted the definition of NbS as “actions to protect, conserve, restore, sustainably use and manage natural or modified terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and marine ecosystems, which address social, eco-

nomic and environmental challenges effectively and adaptively, while simultaneously providing human well-being, ecosystem services and resilience and biodiversity benefits.”<sup>2</sup> NbS are based on the recognition of the deep interconnections between humans and their environment, and the many different ways humans depend on and benefit from healthy and functioning ecosystems for their health, wealth and wellbeing. This concept is not new and has been used for decades by practitioners to support sustainable island living through a variety of related approaches.

By harnessing nature’s contributions to people, NbS can positively reinforce human rights. For example, by maintaining biodiversity and core ecosystem functions and services such as provision of fish, marine protected or conserved areas contribute to people’s rights to an adequate food supply and a clean, safe and healthy environment (Mangubhai et al., 2015). Similarly, by conserving native forests and the traditional medicinal plants they host, people’s right to health is protected, as well as communities’s rights to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment (Mangubhai and Lumelume, 2019).

Conversely, as any project affecting people’s land and access to natural resources, it is critical that NbS take a human rights-based approach, and ensure they do not infringe on any community or community member’s rights, including by thorough consultations with all stakeholders and having the right social and environmental safeguards in place. Because the implications of human rights violations and environmental degradations are felt most acutely by people that are already in vulnerable situations, and have less power and privilege (Barclay et al., 2021), particular attention has been paid in the development and environment sectors around Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI). UNEA 5 resolution on NbS specifically calls for further engagement with local communities, women and youth as well as with Indigenous Peoples to build transparent and gender-responsive processes for NbS.<sup>3</sup> This call was echoed later that year by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council recognition of the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment to address the human rights impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution and to ensure rights-based environmental action.<sup>4</sup>

More broadly, the importance of adopting a human rights-based approach is now widely recognized by the conservation and development sectors, and increasingly integrated into their frameworks at all levels, from international agreements such as the Convention on Biological Diversity,

through regional, national or institutional levels. Human rights and gender have also been mainstreamed into donor policies and criteria, which have supported important developments and integration into specific sectors, such as fisheries. The Kiwa Initiative is now investing in that space for NbS for climate change adaptation more broadly.

### **Partnering with the Kiwa Initiative**

The Kiwa Initiative<sup>5</sup> is a multi-donor programme funded by European Union, France, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. It aims to strengthen the climate change resilience of Pacific Island ecosystems, communities and economies through NbS, by protecting, sustainably managing and restoring biodiversity. The Kiwa Initiative is supporting easier access to climate change adaptation and NbS funding for national and local authorities, civil society, international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and regional organizations in Pacific Island countries and territories.

SPREP, the Pacific's primary intergovernmental organization charged with supporting the work of its twenty-one Pacific Island Countries and Territories Members (PICTs) to address the region's environmental management challenges, provide technical assistance to its PICTs beneficiaries to support the development of Kiwa regional projects and capacity-building for the implementation of rights-based, gender-sensitive and socially inclusive NbS biodiversity conservation and climate change adaptation in the region.<sup>6</sup>

Human rights, including GEDSI, are issues the Kiwa Initiative is particularly attentive to promote in NbS, and on which specific support to Kiwa Beneficiaries and partners of Kiwa projects is provided.

The integration of human rights, including gender equality, is one of the six pillars enabling SPREP's work and the delivery of its assistance to its Members, as identified in its 2017-2026 Strategic Plan. NbS are a key area of work for SPREP through various programs and projects where benefits to ecosystems and human rights can be achieved, and on which SPREP partnered with the Kiwa Initiative. To ensure effective support on these issues, SPREP partnered with a Fiji-based team of conservation and human rights experts, to develop and implement a strategy to strengthen and integrate human rights knowledge, awareness and capacity with NbS practitioners in the Pacific. These efforts also included contributions from Kiwa partners,

particularly regional human rights and social development experts of the Pacific Community (SPC), and the Pacific Disability Forum (PDF).

The first step in this learning process was to clarify the links between human rights and Pacific Islands nature-based solutions.

### Developing a Human Rights Framework for NbS

Emerging literature and environmental frameworks are placing a greater emphasis on human rights and human rights-based approaches (HRBA). There are multiple gender and human rights international conventions that are relevant to the environment sector, which many Pacific Island countries and territories are signatory to, as well as regional declarations by the region's leaders.<sup>7</sup> Most PICTs have recognized core human rights in their national constitutions and continue to make progress on domesticating

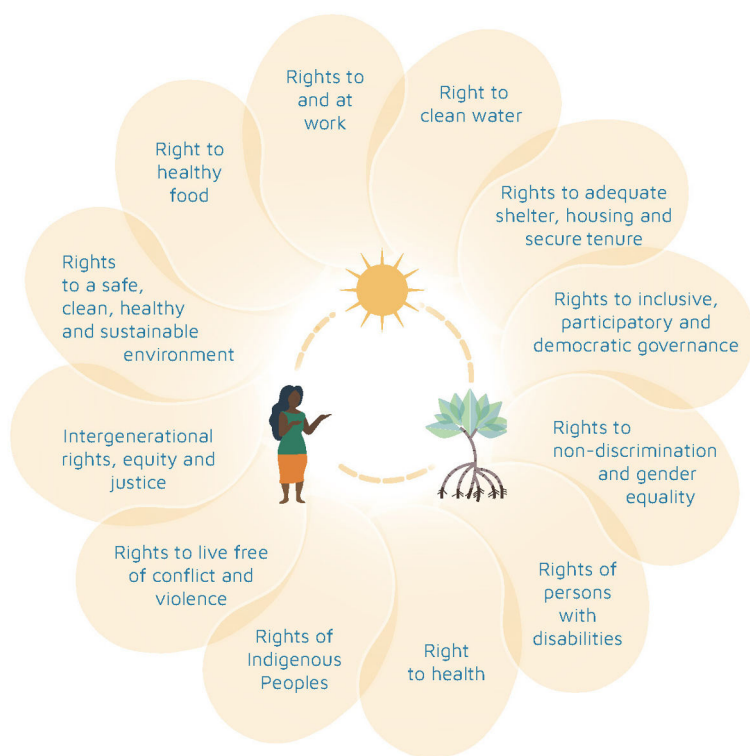


Figure 1. Twelve human rights relevant to Nature-based Solutions. Copyright: Kiwa Initiative

human rights and gender principles in legal and policy frameworks (e.g., Graham & D'Andrea 2021).

In reviewing these commitments and considering the responsibilities of both state and civil society actors, twelve key rights have been identified as particularly relevant to the environmental sector. These rights should be taken into account when designing and implementing NbS for climate change adaptation (see Figure 1). This does not imply that other rights, such as the rights to life, liberty, and education, are not also important. Instead, these twelve rights are highlighted as useful starting points for exploring how human rights intersect with NbS.

This framework acknowledges that human rights are interdependent, indivisible and interrelated, living instruments and constantly shaped and adapted to current global challenges and that the rights to non-discrimination and gender equality and rights of persons with disabilities, are cross-cutting and apply to all of the rights. They also provide minimum standards and leave room for contextualization.

### **Collective Learning on Human Rights in Nature-based Solutions in the Pacific Islands**

Building on this framework, SPREP in partnership with Talanoa Consulting provided learning activities for Kiwa Initiative regional project beneficiaries and their partners, mostly members of international and local conservation-NGOs from across the Pacific Islands region. This process was initiated in May 2023 during the first Kiwa Initiative Regional Workshop organized by SPREP with Pacific Community-SPC and IUCN-ORO, in partnership with Talanoa Consulting. The workshop gathered thirty-five people from Kiwa project leaders and partners in Suva, Fiji.<sup>8</sup> The workshop socialized key concepts and terms related to Human Rights, Human Rights-based Approach (HRBA) and GEDSI. The participants discussed why these matter in nature-based solutions for climate change adaptation, and how they can apply them to their work. As reported in SPREP website:<sup>9</sup>

During the workshop, Gender and Human Rights Specialist, Ms Natalie Makhoul and SPC Advisor on GEDSI and Fisheries, Ms Margaret Fox, presented on the lessons from the Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership (PEUMP) Programme, which has an overarching goal of integrating GEDSI and Human Rights into fisheries, and uplifting people-centred approaches.

Ms. Makhoul highlighted the importance of finding “gentle entry points” to have these important discussions.

“What we have learned through PEUMP is the importance of stepping back,” she said. “There are still lots of misconceptions around what gender and human rights mean, so it’s important to create a dialogue with partners around their needs and understanding of these concepts without assuming anything.”

Most Kiwa beneficiaries working in the conservation sector already had some experience in human rights-based approaches and gender equity, disability and social inclusion and an understanding of why these issues matter to their work. They also acknowledged gaps where improvements are needed.

Critical areas were identified where human rights and Nature-based Solutions (NbS) projects intersect, including culturally appropriate human rights-based approaches when working with communities, inclusive facilitation, as well engagement with, and for, people with disabilities, as a key cross-cutting issue.



**Game 2: Learning about power inequalities through the Power Walk.** Margot Bantegny © Kiwa Initiative – May 2023.

The recommendations from the workshop served to design a learning process aimed to assist Kiwa partners effectively address GEDSI and broader human rights in their NbS for climate change adaptation projects, through three main pathways: (1) the development of resources and training material, (2) the facilitation of a Community of Practice (CoP) and (3) awareness and capacities development on human rights and GEDSI.

The main objective was to raise awareness on human rights concepts and issues of relevance to NbS, encourage ownership and further exploration and investment from Kiwa regional projects in their specific areas





**Working Group 3: First Kiwa regional workshop on GEDSI.** Margot Bantegny © Kiwa Initiative – May 2023.

and communities, and to create a platform for sharing lessons learned from NbS practitioners from the region. Activities were designed to adapt to the resources available and regional scale of delivery, meaning most meetings took place online in short sessions, and content was introductory and focussed on key questions and concepts relevant across NbS sectors and diverse socio-cultural Pacific Island contexts.

### **1. Resources and training materials**

Many efforts have been made and resources developed to support GEDSI in the Pacific Islands. A review of relevant resources currently in use in the Pacific identified around fifteen relevant and suitable tools and guides for practitioners, and three complementary simple tools and a training were developed with Kiwa partners where gaps were identified on human rights and GEDSI understanding and integration for NbS.



Figure 2. The three toolkits developed under the Kiwa Initiative.

- Human Rights for Nature-based Solutions in Pacific Islands Booklet: the purpose of this booklet is to provide an introduction to what human rights are based on the 12 human-rights framework, and why they are relevant and should be considered when designing and implementing NbS for climate change adaptation in the Pacific Islands.
- Tool to assess human rights risks to inform NbS in Pacific Islands: Based on the 12 human-rights framework, this human rights risk assessment tool has been designed for organizations and practitioners working on NbS in the Pacific Islands, who wish to ensure their projects do not cause harm to people. The tool is based on checklists and guiding questions to support risk identification.
- The Gender Equity, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) Analysis Guide: the guide is designed for organizations and practitioners working on NbS in the Pacific island region. It provides information and guidance on how to conduct a GEDSI analysis and to use the findings to ensure stakeholders promote fairness and ensure social inclusion in NbS initiatives.
- The Human Rights in Pacific Islands NbS Training Package: This training package includes two presentations on the Human Rights framework and on how to use it to conduct human rights risk assessment, with a guide for facilitators including further resources and suggestions of activities. The material is meant to be delivered either facilitated, as self-learning or in-person, and has already



been used and adapted by various organizations to support internal awareness workshops on NbS.

All these resources are available in English and French on SPREP Virtual Library: <https://library.sprep.org/project/term/11026>

The resources will be updated based on feedback and experiences from their application by Kiwa partners.

## **2. Community of Practice (CoP)**

The Kiwa GEDSI Community of Practice is a dedicated space for GEDSI Focal Points and interested staff of Kiwa Initiative regional projects to gather online on a quarterly basis to learn and share their experiences, knowledge and resources around specific topics related to human rights, and ensure there is GEDSI capacity within organizations during and beyond the timeline of the Kiwa Initiative.

The Kiwa GEDSI Community of Practice has gathered representatives from twenty organizations, regional organizations, international and national conservation NGOs from across fourteen Pacific Island Countries and Territories and Australia, with various levels of awareness and experience on the topic.

Together, they have discussed the key concepts of human rights, how to conduct human rights risk assessments, main GEDSI concepts, how to conduct a GEDSI analysis, and principles for GEDSI-sensitive community facilitation. Although facing the inherent limitations of online meetings, particular attention was paid to interactivity and ample time given to group discussions and hearing from each other, which was what participants valued most in these meetings. The last session of this first phase is dedicated entirely to discussions and reflections from the GEDSI CoP members on their journey integrating these principles into their NbS projects. Their progress was also captured through the development of case studies on each project, a process that also allowed partners to structure their reflection and refine their approach.

For many conservation officers working in local NGOs, this has been the first platform to join a regional network and share their experiences on these issues, both through their work and personal lives.

### 3. Building Awareness and Developing Capacities on Human Rights (HRBA) and GEDSI

Due to the increased interest in NbS and learning about human rights and GEDSI in the Pacific, a series of five one-hour online lunch sessions were organized throughout 2024. Going over the five topics of the GEDSI CoP, these sessions provided the opportunity for GEDSI CoP members who had joined at different times to catch up on missed topics but were also open to all and reached a larger audience beyond the Kiwa partners. These were meant for a larger audience, and have gathered participants from across the region, either as a first introduction for practitioners new to these concepts, or as refreshers for experienced practitioners wanting to be up to date with the regional conversation on these issues.

The significant interest received in these learning sessions (up to five hundred people registered to some of them) confirmed the need to provide more learning events available to all.

## Conclusion

Human rights approaches, including GEDSI, are not new and have been mainstreamed into organizational frameworks and policies. However, specific attention, and capacity to effectively integrate them into NbS and conservation action from the sector in the region remains a challenge. To go beyond formal requirements to see actual change in how NbS projects are designed and implemented at a regional scale and across sectors has required significant strategizing to find entry points in terms of content and formats relevant to all, as well as significant investment and commitments from all partners in time and resources to engage, learn and share on these issues. Pursuing these collective learning efforts will be key to drive positive change in the long run, but the genuine appetite and recognition of the importance of human rights and GEDSI principles in environment and development work by Kiwa Initiative partners and beyond promise exciting new understandings as these concepts and approaches get refined and adapted to the rich diversity of Pacific Island contexts.

The integration of human rights into NbS is not only necessary but also transformative. By recognizing the interdependence of environmental health and human rights, the Kiwa Initiative and its partners are building a

more resilient and equitable future for Pacific Island communities, where nature and people thrive together.

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## Endnotes

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3 Ibid, see in particular Articles 7 and 8.

4 See The Human Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment, United Nations General Assembly, A/76/L.75, 26 July 2022, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3982508?ln=en&v=pdf>.

5 See <https://kiwainitiative.org/en/>, <https://www.sprep.org/project/kiwa-initiative>.

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