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Voices from the Global South

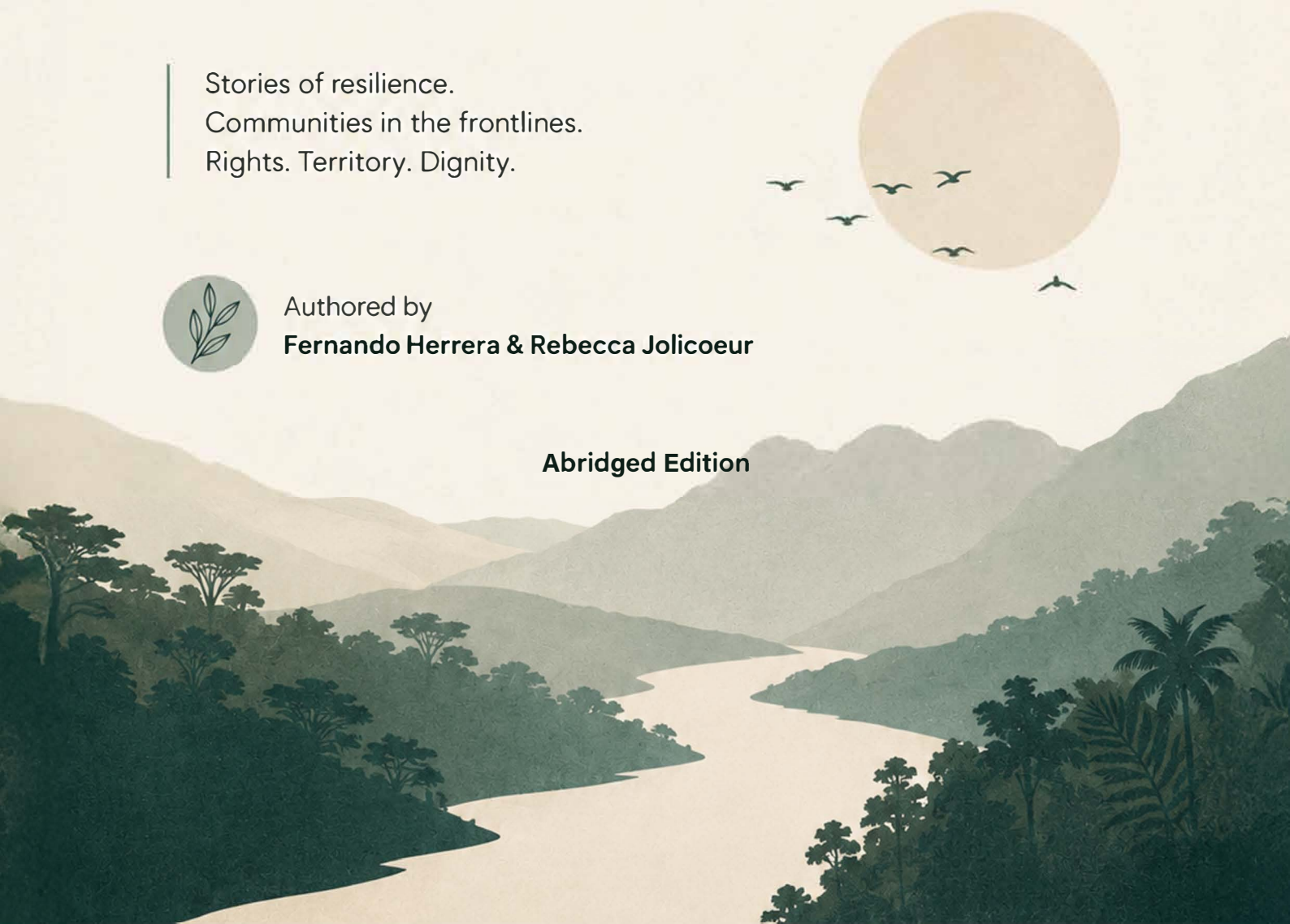
Testimonies from the Climate Emergency

Stories of resilience.
Communities in the frontlines.
Rights. Territory. Dignity.



Authored by
Fernando Herrera & Rebecca Jolicoeur

Abridged Edition



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About the Authors

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Her expertise spans project coordination, monitoring and evaluation, individual and family empowerment, and training and capacity building. She demonstrates strong cultural competency and a deep commitment that transcends borders, cultures, and communities with a human rights, people-centered and dignity-driven approach that emphasizes collaboration and results-oriented practices.

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Frontline Voices

"When you set foot on the land and walk it, there is the connection with the forest, the connection with the spirit of the jaguar."

— Eliza Enqueri, Waorani people, Ecuadorian Amazon

"On the coast, people look out for one another, and the sea is not only their home but also their means of livelihood."

—Elderly resident, west coast of Mauritius

"We ask the international community not to see Pacific peoples as symbols of vulnerability, but as partners in building solutions."

— Belyndar Rikimani, Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change

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SECTION A

A. Executive Summary

The climate emergency is not, at its core, an environmental problem awaiting a technical fix. It is a systemic human rights crisis — one that falls hardest on the communities that have contributed least to it. This dossier makes that case by joining the lived testimony of frontline communities to the best available science and to the most recent standards of international law.

Adopting a comparative South–South lens, it examines two contrasting but connected geographies: the Amazon Basin, a continental “climate regulator” whose Indigenous peoples face territorial and cultural erasure as the forest nears an ecological tipping point; and the Small Island Developing States of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific — “ocean states” such as Mauritius whose sovereignty and very habitability are threatened by sea-level rise and the collapse of natural coastal defenses. Through the voices of the Waorani of the Ecuadorian Amazon, of communities across Mauritius and Rodrigues, and of Pacific youth advocacy, it shows how climate change acts as a “threat multiplier,” converting ecological loss into violations of the rights to life, health, water, food, culture, territory, and self-determination.

Central findings

On the frontlines, climate impacts are already dismantling fundamental rights — not as a future risk, but as a present reality documented in the testimonies gathered here, from chronic water scarcity in Rodrigues to the erosion of Waorani territory. The injustice is structural: those bearing the gravest consequences are those least responsible for the crisis. This is a question of justice, not geography.

International law has caught up. Within a single period, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (2024), the International Court of Justice (2025), and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (2025) converged on binding standards: enhanced due diligence anchored in the 1.5 °C benchmark, prevention and cooperation as legal duties, a clean and healthy environment as a precondition for human rights owed *erga omnes*, and the protection of future generations. The decisive gap is now implementation, not recognition — as the Pacific testimony puts it, “listening must ultimately be measured by action rather than statements.”

SECTION B

B. Introduction

1. The Climate Emergency as a Human Rights Crisis

The climate emergency demands a paradigm shift: from the periphery of technical environmentalism to the core of human rights. Reframing climate change as a systemic human rights violation opens legal pathways for accountability, reparations, and the “polluter pays” principle. Climate impacts act as lethal “threat multipliers,” weaponising existing inequalities to dismantle human dignity. In the Amazon, degradation of the forest’s “hydrological engine” — which provides some 15% of global freshwater discharge — directly threatens the rights to life, water, and food of hundreds of ethnic groups. For Small Island Developing States (SIDS) such as Mauritius, sea-level rise and extreme weather are not logistical challenges but existential threats to statehood itself, extinguishing the right to self-determination when territory becomes uninhabitable. With projections such as the loss of 99% of reef-building corals at 2 °C of warming, today’s failures amount to a theft of biological heritage from generations not yet born.

2. Why the Amazon and Mauritius? A Cross-Regional Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis of the Amazon — a continental “climate regulator” — and Mauritius — an “ocean state” — grounds a robust South–South perspective, showing how ecological collapse in one hemisphere mirrors the erosion of sovereignty in the other. The Amazon is home to 34 million people, including 2.7 million Indigenous people; with 17% of the forest already lost and a “tree dieback” tipping point looming, degradation becomes, for peoples in voluntary isolation, a direct infringement of the rights to territory and life. Mauritius and other SIDS control maritime areas many times larger than their land, yet this offers no protection against physical destruction: the loss of coral reefs removes the island’s primary natural barrier against sea-level rise, while a debt-and-remoteness trap forces repeated borrowing to recover from climate shocks, eroding the State’s capacity to protect its citizens’ rights.

3. Purpose and Scope of the Dossier

The purpose of this dossier is to analyse the climate emergency not as a mere environmental phenomenon but as a systemic human rights crisis that falls hardest on the Global South communities least responsible for it. Focusing on the Amazon Basin and the Republic of Mauritius, it amplifies the voices of frontline communities through a testimonial approach, linking environmental degradation to violations of the rights to life,

health, food, water, culture, and territory. Adopting a comparative South–South lens, and drawing on the best available science and the landmark standards of the ITLOS, ICJ, and Inter-American Court advisory opinions, it asserts the right of present and future generations to a safe, stable, and healthy climate. It is intended for the Global Campus of Human Rights community and for policymakers, legal practitioners, and civil society.

SECTION C

C. Methodology: A Human Rights–Based Framework for Climate Testimonials

1. Ethical Foundations and Intercultural Safeguards

The dossier rests on an ethical framework centred on Free, Prior, and Informed Consent, obtained through culturally appropriate means. Because disclosing identity can endanger environmental defenders and residents of contested Indigenous territories, a “principle of caution” governs anonymisation and the handling of sensitive details, and the finished dossier will be returned to the participating communities.

2. Testimonial and Interview Design

It uses structured and semi-structured qualitative interviews to capture the lived experience of climate change, translated into English with care to preserve original metaphors, intent, and cultural nuance. The design draws on a typology of voices — community members as direct witnesses; caregivers offering a “proxy perspective” on children and future generations; professionals working alongside communities; and public or private actors. In line with international standards, children are not interviewed directly; their experiences are mediated through adults.

3. Methodological Scope and Limitations

Rather than statistical representation, the dossier offers deep, localised, and intentionally qualitative insights. It acknowledges operational limits — above all the challenge of translating regional and Indigenous languages without losing nuance, and practical constraints arising from recent diplomatic tensions in the region — while affirming that its value lies in situated knowledge translated into policy-relevant evidence.

SECTION D

D. Regions of Study

1. The Amazon Region: A Transboundary Socio-Ecological Biome

1.1. The Amazon Biome

The Amazon is the largest continuous tropical rainforest on Earth and one of the most biodiverse regions of the planet. Yet, despite its ecological centrality, it is degrading rapidly: between 1985 and 2018 the biome lost some 724,000 km² of natural vegetation, pushing it toward an ecological tipping point.

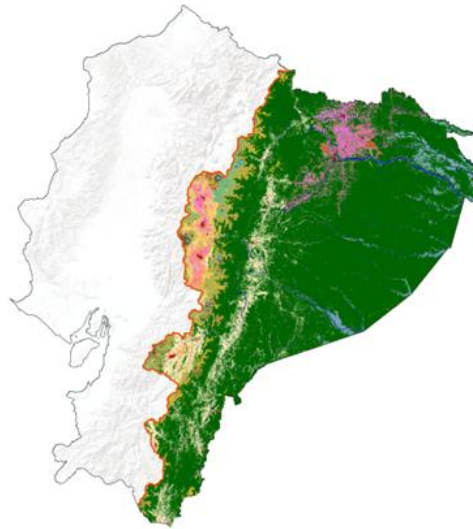


Map 1. The Amazon Biome across South America

Regional map showing the biome boundaries over the nine countries, the Amazon River and its main tributaries, and an inset with the proportional distribution by country. The red line defines the maximum territory of the amazon biome. Source: RAISG (2020), Amazonia Under Pressure, Map 1 (p. 9).

1.2. The Ecuadorian Amazon

The Ecuadorian Amazon, locally known as the Oriente, covers approximately 120,000 km² — about 43% of the country's territory — and holds extraordinary biological and cultural diversity.

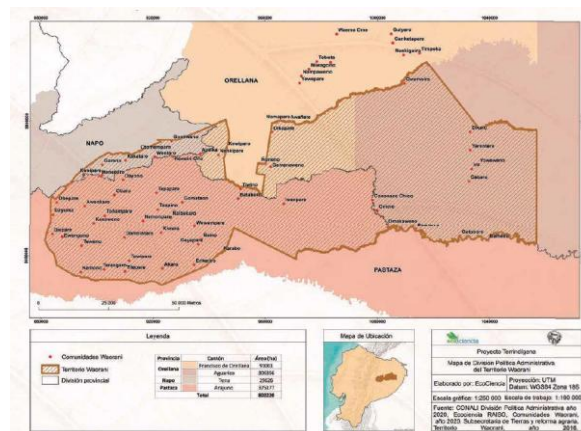


Map 2. The Ecuadorian Amazon

This Map highlights the Ecuadorian Amazon, and is available at <https://ecociencia.org/portfolio-item/mapbiomas-amazonia/> (last accessed 31 may 2026), and it's credited to EcoCiencia and MapBiomas Ecuador.

1.3. The Waorani People of Pastaza

The Waorani are an Indigenous nationality of the Ecuadorian Amazon who speak wao-terero, a language isolate. Roughly 87 Waorani communities are settled between the Waorani Territory and Yasuní National Park, each with its own governance. The testimonies in this dossier were gathered with members of the Waorani communities of Pastaza, whose direct experience of the forest anchors the accounts that follow.



Map 3. Waorani Territory in the Ecuadorian Amazon

Map showing the Waorani Territory across Pastaza, Napo, and Orellana, with Waorani communities, the Tagaeri-Taromenane Intangible Zone (ZITT), the Yasuní National Park, and the principal road and river systems. Source: NAWA (2025), Estrategia de monitoreo de presiones socioambientales de la Nacionalidad Waorani del Ecuador, Mapa 1 (pp. 4–5). Cartographic elaboration by Fundación EcoCiencia.

1.4. Climate Impacts on the Amazon

The Amazon is among the regions most exposed to the compound impacts of climate change; official Ecuadorian data document declining precipitation and rising temperatures. For peoples such as the Waorani, whose food security and cultural practices are inseparable from forest ecosystems and seasonal cycles, these shifts strike at the very foundations of daily life.

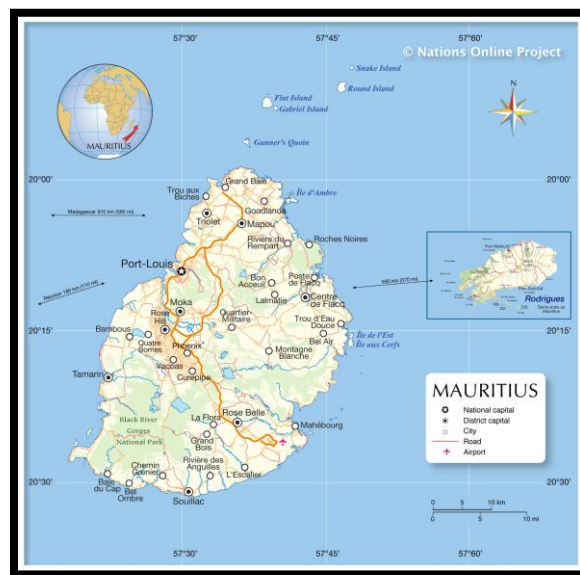
2. Mauritius

2.1. Overview of the Republic of Mauritius

Mauritius is a Small Island Developing State in the Indian Ocean, off the southeastern coast of Africa. The Republic comprises the main island of Mauritius together with Rodrigues and the more distant Agalega and St Brandon islands.

2.2. Environment Context and Vulnerabilities

Its tropical maritime climate exposes it to cyclones, rising seas, and coastal erosion, with the more remote outer islands especially vulnerable. Mauritius is also a biodiversity hotspot — coral reefs, lagoons, and endemic species — whose degradation directly undermines coastal protection and the livelihoods that depend on it.



Map 4. Mauritius and Rodrigues

Political map of Mauritius, showing the island of Rodrigues, the national capital Port Louis, district capitals, major cities and towns, and main roads. Source: Nations Online Project (n.d.). <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/Mauritius-map.htm>

SECTION E

E. Testimonies

Introduction

The following section presents testimonies collected. These testimonies seek to document personal and community experiences related to environmental change, territorial challenges, and the broader impacts of the climate emergency in vulnerable regions of the Global South. The interviews were conducted using flexible and context-sensitive methodologies in order to accommodate the realities, preferences, and accessibility needs of participants.

The testimonies collected in this section reflect the personal experiences, perceptions, and opinions of the participants themselves, expressed in their own words and shared in good faith. They do not constitute statements of fact by the authors, and any references to governments, public authorities, institutions, organizations, companies, or individuals represent the participants' own accounts and views. They do not reflect any finding, criticism, or endorsement by the authors or by the project's partner institutions, none of which has independently verified the individual claims contained in these testimonies.

1. Tania Caiga (Waorani People, Ecuador)¹

“Without territory, we are nothing.”

For Tania Caiga, a member of the Waorani community of Pastaza and the Organization of the Waorani of Pastaza (OWAP), territory is far more than land. It is the foundation of Waorani identity, culture and survival, handed down from one generation to the next. Throughout the interview, Tania returns repeatedly to one central idea:

“Through the territory we have trees, rivers, waterfalls, animals, fruits—we have everything. Without territory, we would cease to exist as a people.”

¹ The testimony was collected on March 6, 2026, through a combination of telephone conversation and written exchanges via WhatsApp. This approach was adopted in order to accommodate the participant's availability and communication preferences as a member of the Waorani community of Pastaza.

Due to logistical and connectivity limitations, informed consent was obtained orally prior to the interview. The consent and the whole interview recording has been securely archived by the research team.

The interview questions and responses were edited with the participant's consent for clarity, readability, and organizational purposes, without altering the meaning or substance of the testimony provided. Questions and answers pertaining informed consent, and personal information were not transcribed.

She describes a way of life sustained by hunting, fishing, medicinal plants and the resources of the forest. Unlike life in the cities, where people depend on services and money, Waorani communities continue to rely directly on their territory.

“In our communities, we still have medicinal plants, food, and many things that come directly from the territory. That is why our connection to the land is so important. Our territory remains clean and free from contamination.”

But Tania believes this relationship with the land is under immense pressure. She says the climate has changed markedly over the years, with heavier rainfall and flooding damaging crops and family livelihoods. Fish disappear when rivers become polluted, and environmental changes make it harder for communities to sustain themselves. She attributes these changes to the expansion of external economic activities in and around Indigenous territories.

These changes are accompanied by growing concern for the health and future of Waorani families. Women are increasingly affected by illnesses, while children fall sick more often with malaria and respiratory diseases. Many communities still face limited access to healthcare and education, particularly in remote forest areas — and some families have left their ancestral territory in search of both.

Despite these challenges, Tania describes a community determined to defend its land, strengthening its own forms of self-government as a way of protecting both territory and future.

“Today, the organization of our people seeks to build our own self-government in order to defend our lives.”

Many Waorani have joined marches and demonstrations, convinced that unless the territory is protected, future generations will inherit a diminished forest and fewer ways to live as their ancestors did.

“People ask themselves what will happen in the future to our children and grandchildren... because we fear that in the future there may no longer be fish or enough food. These problems especially affect women, many of whom depend on making handicrafts to support their children’s education and health needs.”

This is her message to people beyond the Amazon:

“We do not want industrial activities in our lands. We want to protect our food, our medicine, our history, and everything our grandparents left for us.”

For Tania, defending the territory is not only about the present. It is about honouring those who came before and safeguarding the future for those yet to come. She returns, once more, to the idea that runs through her testimony:

“Without territory, we are nothing. It is the root and the legacy left to us by our grandparents. They also left us the jaguar — a symbol that watched over and protected every corner of the territory, defending it from those who wished to harm it.”

2. Eliza Enqueri (Waorani People, Ecuador)²

“The trees cannot raise their voice; that is why we human beings must raise it for them.”

For Eliza Enqueri, a member of the Waorani community of Pastaza, knowledge of the forest is inseparable from Waorani identity. From childhood, the Pikenani — the wise elders — pass down the songs, the uses of medicinal plants, and the skills of survival.

“From the time we are very small, the Pikenani teach us how to survive in the territory.”

The forest is not only a source of life but a sacred space of clean rivers, giant trees, caves, waterfalls and lagoons — so complete that even wayfinding is ancestral: an elder once broke a branch and told her, ‘This is your GPS.’

“It is like a sacred place, where you refresh your mind, where you can be free.”

But that world is under strain. Eliza has watched animals grow scarce as outsiders enter to hunt, and the rivers fall as the fish run out. The rains, too, have changed, and her grandparents warned her that once the climate shifts, it never goes back to being the same.

“It no longer rains the way it used to... you start to wonder: could something be happening to the territory?”

She fears, above all, the loss of the animals that guard the forest — and of the jaguar in particular.

“Each time a jaguar is killed, I feel it is also a loss for the protection of the territory.”

² The testimony was collected on June 6, 2026, via telephone conversation. This approach was adopted in order to accommodate the participant’s availability and communication preferences as a member of the Waorani community of Pastaza.

Due to logistical and connectivity limitations, informed consent was obtained orally prior to the interview. The consent and the whole interview recording has been securely archived by the research team.

The interview questions and responses were edited with the participant’s consent for clarity, readability, and organizational purposes, without altering the meaning or substance of the testimony provided. Questions and answers pertaining informed consent, and personal information were not transcribed.

Now a mother, Eliza sees this as a moment to act: to raise women's and community voices against the pressures on the territory, and to defend a Waorani education that keeps language, culture and identity alive across 'both worlds.' Against the drive to extract the territory's resources, she invokes a mandate from the Pikenani:

"Our territory is not for sale, because our territory is life."

For Eliza, knowing a place is different from feeling it — and that felt connection is what she most wants outsiders to understand:

"When you set foot on the land and walk it, there is a connection with the forest, a connection with the spirit of the jaguar."

She closes in song, in wao terero — a song, she says, for 'the forest of our ancestors; the forest for the generation to come.'

3. The People of Baladirou (Rodrigues)

"It is now April 2026, and the last time we received a water supply was last year."

In Baladirou, on the island of Rodrigues, water scarcity is not new — but a changing climate has made it acute. "It is raining less and less, and cyclones now bring no rain," the community explains, even as the population grows and ageing pipes fall into disrepair.

They have tried everything to adapt — reusing old fridges as containers, buying jerrycans, harvesting rainwater, drawing on natural springs — but the strain is overwhelming:

"Our cisterns are failing due to long periods without rain, and the natural springs are disappearing or drying up very quickly as temperatures rise."

Where water once arrived monthly, the gaps have become punishing — "it is now April 2026, and the last time we received a water supply was last year" — forcing families to pool resources for tanks or shelter temporarily with relatives elsewhere on the island. Livelihoods built on farming and food self-sufficiency are unravelling:

"As for family vegetable gardens and small-scale livestock farming, we are being forced to abandon these activities."

Even the water they can gather carries risk. The rainwater "is not safe to drink," and purifying it by boiling or bleach — without training, they explain, "we lack experience and sometimes put our own health and that of our children at risk." The toll falls hardest on the young: "many plan to leave once they reach adulthood." Their appeal is for fairness — a restructured, equitably distributed supply, investment in dams and reservoirs, and village collection points to "ensure the equitable distribution of water."

4. Young Queer Alliance (LGBTQIA+ Youth, Mauritius)

“I am more afraid of the police than I am of climate change.”

For LGBTQIA+ young people in Mauritius, the climate crisis compounds discrimination and insecurity that are already part of daily life. Stacy lives in a stigmatised housing estate with inadequate drainage, and disasters bring more than power cuts — they bring fear of who will, and won’t, help.

“In an emergency, I always turn to formal and informal LGBTQIA+ solidarity networks rather than to the government, non-governmental organisations or my family, as it is safer.”

Her fear of the authorities is explicit — “I am more afraid of the police than I am of climate change” — and, for Stacy, the remedy begins with equality itself:

“This is what must form the very foundation of climate justice: the equal enjoyment of rights... Resources must be distributed fairly so that everyone can cope with environmental disasters and feel truly protected.”

Ginger Mary describes the same insecurity as cyclones and heatwaves intensify. Having “already experienced discrimination from support services such as certain NGOs or doctors,” she dreads relying on emergency shelters and turns instead to the LGBTQIA+ community that “welcomes me, supports me... and helps me to rebuild my life.” Her conclusion is a demand for inclusion:

“Marginalised or low-income communities — who are the most vulnerable to natural disasters and global warming — must be at the heart of initiatives promoting climate justice.”

5. A.Baboo. An Elderly Resident (West Coast of Mauritius)

“We depend on the sea to live and survive: it is our own personal lottery.”

An elderly widow who has lived on the west coast for twenty years describes a community bound to the ocean:

“On the coast, people look out for one another, and the sea is not only their home but also their means of livelihood... A well-preserved sea and coastline are a true treasure.”

But rising temperatures, rising seas, erosion and erratic rainfall are making that life precarious. “Our homes are regularly flooded by rising sea levels,” she says, and “during heavy rainfall, the road leading to our neighbourhood becomes submerged within

minutes.” On a modest Basic Retirement Pension, much of it spent on rent and upkeep, and with fragile health, she feels largely on her own:

“Unfortunately, we receive very little support from the government to tackle the climate crisis and save our homes.”

When residents buy stones and build walls to hold back the water, the State often treats these efforts as illegal, and she senses that protection is reserved for others: “one gets the impression that these measures are being implemented because they benefit tourists more than they do Mauritians.” Still, she perseveres, drawing strength “from the wonderful things that God accomplishes” and from the solidarity of her community.

6. Marine Discovery Centre (Marine Conservation & Education, Mauritius)

“Many participants initially struggle to connect global climate change with local marine impacts.”

The Marine Discovery Centre pairs scientific monitoring with community education. Using accessible, standardised protocols, it tracks whales, sea turtles and coral reefs — recording coral cover, “bleaching intensity,” disease, crown-of-thorns starfish and “signs of cyclone damage, sedimentation, or pollution.” The aim is to build the evidence the island lacks:

“It is essential for building the long-term data baselines that Mauritius currently lacks... establish early warning signs of ecosystem stress.”

Turning scattered observations into reliable climate indicators is hard — citizen-science data varies, and local events “like cyclones or pollution can blur climate signals.” The Centre’s educational work tackles a different gap: many participants “initially struggle to connect global climate change with local marine impacts.” Interactive formats work best, and translating the “Climate Fresk” workshop into Kreol Morisien “removes language barriers” and builds “personal ownership of climate issues,” fostering “a more informed, responsible and resilient society.”

7. Clivens (Organic Planter, Baie du Tombeau, Mauritius)

“Organic farming is not only essential for consumer health, but also for the preservation of the land.”

Clivens, a planter from Baie du Tombeau, adopted organic and natural methods from the start as a way to withstand a changing climate. “Despite the weather instability the country is facing, our vegetables, fruit and plants adapt more easily,” he says. New pests and plant

diseases appear — leaf miners, scale insects, rats — but he answers them without chemicals, using remedies such as Persian lilac. The payoff is resilience and stability:

“This has enabled me to minimise crop losses, which has a positive impact on my income... The result is a more stable crop.”

His concern reaches beyond his own harvest to public health and the soil itself: “we are seeing an increase in the number of illnesses linked to these non-organic vegetables, as well as soil degradation caused by the use of pesticides.”

8. J. Labonté (Student, Mauritius)

“Climate change is not just a distant problem, but a reality that affects our daily lives.”

For J. Labonté, a student, climate change is a daily obstacle. Rising heat and sudden downpours damage school supplies and shoes, and classrooms “do not always meet the needs of pupils... when faced with unstable weather conditions.” Heat drains concentration; flooded roads make the journey home dangerous. When rainfall forces closures, lessons move online or stop altogether:

“This widens inequalities, particularly for students from vulnerable families who cannot always afford electricity, or for those with learning difficulties.”

The experience turned into resolve. Convinced that the crisis “is not just a distant problem, but a reality that affects our daily lives,” Labonté practises small daily actions — reducing waste, recycling, saving water and electricity — trusting that “the small actions of each and every one of us can make a difference.”

9. Eco-Sud (Environmental NGO, Mauritius)

“Environmental protection is recognised not only as an ecological issue, but also as a matter of fundamental rights, social justice and the public interest.”

Eco-Sud, a leading Mauritian environmental NGO, treats environmental protection as a question of justice. It “monitors developments, mobilises support, advocates and, where necessary, takes legal action to defend the environment and citizens’ environmental rights.” Its landmark Pointe d’Esny case reached the Privy Council, which affirmed the right of citizens and civil-society groups to defend the environment in court — “a major step forward for access to environmental justice in Mauritius.”

Durable policy, Eco-Sud argues, must weave together three kinds of knowledge:

“Institutional knowledge, scientific knowledge and community knowledge. Without this complementarity, environmental policies risk being technically incomplete, socially unjust or difficult to implement.”

Yet real obstacles persist — limited access to information, complex procedures, unequal resources, and consultations that “often take place late in the process, when the broad outlines have already been decided.” Mauritius has a framework, and has even “recognised the crime of ecocide,” but enforcement is the weak point: “a law... loses its effectiveness if it is not applied transparently, consistently and rigorously.” Eco-Sud calls for recognising the rights of nature, protecting environmentally sensitive areas, and reforming impact assessments — posing, in the end, “a fundamental question: what kind of society do we want to build?” one “in which ecosystems, communities and future generations are genuinely protected for the benefit of everyone.”

10. Dr Vikash Tatayah (Mauritian Wildlife Foundation)

“More than 90 per cent of the original forest has disappeared, considerably reducing the island’s resilience.”

Dr Vikash Tatayah, Chief Executive of the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation, describes threats to the island’s endemic species that are “numerous and complex” — invasive species such as *Acacia nilotica* and *lantana*, the illegal exotic-pet trade, deforestation and development. The cumulative loss is staggering:

“More than 90 per cent of the original forest has disappeared, considerably reducing the island’s resilience to the effects of climate change.”

Progress is slowed by “bureaucratic delays,” weak enforcement, a conservation “brain drain,” and private-sector cooperation that “remains limited, often driven by the pursuit of profit rather than the protection of biodiversity.” Yet Tatayah also sees momentum. Nature-based methods have replaced chemicals; public engagement is rising:

“The Wakashio oil spill mobilised more than 100,000 people onto the streets of Port-Louis, and construction projects have been halted thanks to action by local communities.”

Flagship island-restoration projects on Île Ronde and Île aux Aigrettes show measurable recovery — more seabirds, fewer intrusions, spreading endemic species — and the Foundation now works to create “conservation islands” within the larger islands to strengthen ecological resilience.

11. Marie Stéphanie Perrine (Climate-Adaptation Researcher, Mauritius)

“Small island states are not merely vulnerable territories. They are also laboratories of innovation and resilience.”

Marie Stéphanie Perrine, a climate-adaptation and biodiversity researcher, finds the impacts on Mauritius “now clearly observable in both marine and terrestrial ecosystems” — bleaching reefs, stressed mangroves and seagrass, and, on land, “prolonged droughts, changes in rainfall patterns and invasive alien species” degrading already-fragmented native forests. These changes, she warns, are “jeopardising essential ecosystem services, including coastal protection, water supply and food security.”

She is especially concerned that a whole body of knowledge is being sidelined. For decades, communities have observed “less predictable seasons, reduced rainfall, increasingly scarce water resources, falling crop yields”:

“Farmers, fishermen and older people possess a rich environmental memory... this knowledge is often marginalised in public policy and planning processes.”

Recognising local and traditional knowledge, she argues, “would help to improve the relevance and acceptability of climate policies.” And she insists that vulnerability is only half the story: “small island states are not merely vulnerable territories... whose experiences can inspire climate policies on a global scale.”

SECTION F

F. From the Frontlines to the World Court: A Conversation with Belyndar Rikimani.

Belyndar Rikimani — Campaigns and Research Lead, Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change (PISFCC), Solomon Islands³

“We ask the international community not to see Pacific peoples as symbols of vulnerability, but as partners in building solutions.”

Belyndar Rikimani is a climate advocate from the Solomon Islands and Campaigns and Research Lead of Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change (PISFCC), a 2025 Right Livelihood Laureate and youth-led organisation founded by Pacific law students that spearheaded the global campaign leading the United Nations General Assembly to request the landmark advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the obligations of States regarding climate change. Her testimony moves from the lived reality of the Pacific frontline to the world’s highest court.

For Belyndar, the climate emergency is not an abstraction.

“Climate change is not a distant threat for Pacific Island communities; it is a present reality reshaping everyday life.”

Across the region, she explains, communities face stronger cyclones, accelerating coastal erosion, sea-level rise, saltwater intrusion into freshwater aquifers, declining fisheries and growing food insecurity — pressures felt in the ordinary rhythms of life.

“A damaged coastline can mean losing access to fishing grounds or burial sites. Salty water entering wells can mean mothers and children spending more time and effort securing safe drinking water.”

But the deepest loss, she insists, is cultural. In Pacific societies, land and sea are “part of identity, memory, belonging, and responsibility across generations.”

³ This testimony was collected in writing on June 30 2026, through a structured set of questions shared with the participant. This approach was adopted in order to accommodate the participant's availability and communication preferences. Informed consent for the publication of this testimony and for attribution by name was obtained prior to the interview. The participant's written responses are reproduced as provided, without any alteration to their meaning or substance; only the formatting was standardized, and source-reference markers included by the participant were omitted for readability.

“When land is lost or altered, it is not only physical territory that is affected, but also stories, ancestral connection, and collective identity.”

For Pacific peoples, then, the crisis threatens “the survival of ecosystems, the protection of livelihoods, and the future of cultures, identities, and nationhood itself.” This is why, for Belyndar, climate change is above all a question of justice.

“Our countries have contributed only a tiny fraction of global greenhouse gas emissions, yet we are among those experiencing the earliest and most severe impacts of climate change.”

The injustice, she says, “lies in the fact that communities who did the least to cause the crisis are now carrying some of its heaviest consequences.” The calls that follow — for accountability, cooperation, climate finance and legal responsibility — “are not made as appeals for sympathy, but as demands rooted in justice.” She distils it into a single principle:

“For Pacific peoples, climate justice means that responsibility must match harm.”

Environmental change, she adds, reaches into “the social and cultural fabric of everyday life.” Sacred sites, burial grounds and customary lands “are not just locations; they are part of the living history of a people,” and their loss brings a grief that is “both personal and collective.” Young people, in particular, carry a heavy emotional burden — growing up “knowing that they are inheriting a crisis they did not create” — yet that same experience, she notes, “has also inspired purpose and solidarity,” as Pacific youth turn concern into leadership.

That conviction is what gave rise to PISFCC.

“PISFCC was founded on a simple but powerful conviction: international law should not remain detached from the realities faced by communities on the frontlines of climate change.”

As law students, she recalls, “we recognised a serious gap between what the science was showing, what vulnerable communities were already enduring, and what international law was clearly doing to address the problem.” Seeking an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice “became a strategic and principled way to ask for clarity” about the obligations of States. What began as a student-led initiative “soon grew into something much larger,” uniting communities, governments and civil society “around a shared demand for fairness and accountability.” For Belyndar, the resulting opinion is both a legal milestone and a statement of principle:

“The advisory opinion represents hope because it shows that even communities with limited power can help shape the development of international law.”

It affirms, she says, that climate change is “not just a political concern to be negotiated endlessly, but a matter governed by law,” and “also a human rights issue, because it affects the ability of people and communities to live with dignity, security, and self-determination.”

Are international institutions listening? There has been “meaningful progress,” she acknowledges — the unanimous General Assembly resolutions requesting and then welcoming the Court’s opinion show that the voices of Small Island Developing States are “increasingly influencing international decision-making.” But she is clear about the limits of words:

“Listening must ultimately be measured by action rather than statements.”

Many commitments, she warns, “remain insufficient to match the urgency described by science and experienced by frontline communities.” Climate change, she observes, “often amplifies existing inequalities”: women carry greater responsibilities for food, water and care, and children face disruptions to “education, health, and security” — though women and youth also “demonstrate extraordinary leadership” that should be seen as “central to climate solutions rather than viewed only through the lens of vulnerability.”

Asked what climate justice means to her personally, she returns to the idea of responsibility across generations — ensuring that “future Pacific Islanders inherit not only resilient ecosystems, but also secure homelands, protected cultures, and international legal systems capable of safeguarding their rights.” Her closing message reframes the Pacific’s place in the story:

“The Pacific is often described as the frontline of climate change, but this is ultimately a shared global challenge.”

Her appeal is not for pity but for partnership:

“We ask the international community not to see Pacific peoples as symbols of vulnerability, but as partners in building solutions. Climate justice requires more than empathy; it requires action through emissions reductions, adaptation support, and accountability so that no community is left behind.”

SECTION G

G. State Obligations under International Law: The 2024–2025 Advisory Opinions

In a remarkable convergence, three international courts addressed States’ obligations on climate change within a single period. Although they arise from different legal frameworks — the law of the sea, general international law, and inter-American human rights law — together they confirm that the climate emergency is governed by binding law, not political discretion, and that its standards are anchored in the best available science and the 1.5 °C temperature goal.

The International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (Advisory Opinion, Case No. 31, 21 May 2024), on a request by the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law, held that anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions constitute “pollution of the marine environment” under UNCLOS. This triggers a stringent obligation of due diligence to prevent, reduce, and control such pollution — informed by the best available science and the 1.5 °C goal — and compliance with the Paris Agreement does not, by itself, satisfy it.

The International Court of Justice (Advisory Opinion, 23 July 2025), requested by the UN General Assembly, affirmed that the climate treaties impose binding and mutually supportive obligations; that the 1.5 °C threshold is the agreed primary temperature goal; and that States owe a stringent duty of due diligence to regulate both public and private actors and to prevent significant transboundary harm, alongside a legal duty to cooperate. A State’s failure to act with due diligence may constitute an internationally wrongful act entailing responsibility and full reparation, and these obligations are owed *erga omnes*.

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights (Advisory Opinion OC-32/25, 29 May 2025), requested by Chile and Colombia, recognized that the world faces a “climate emergency” and affirmed an autonomous right to a healthy climate. It requires States to act with “enhanced due diligence,” observe a duty of non-retrogression, set mitigation targets reflecting the highest possible ambition, strictly regulate business enterprises across their value chains, and adopt special protections for groups in situations of vulnerability and for environmental defenders.

Theme	ITLOS (Case No. 31, 2024)	ICJ (GL No. 187, 2025)	IACtHR (OC-32/25, 2025)
Framework starting point /	GHG emissions are “pollution of the marine environment” under UNCLOS, activating Part XII.	Climate treaties (UNFCCC, Kyoto, Paris) impose binding, mutually supportive obligations; the Court states existing law.	The world faces a “climate emergency” requiring urgent, rights-based action.
Standard of conduct	Stringent obligation of due diligence (obligation of conduct), given the high risk of serious, irreversible harm.	Stringent due diligence, heightened by the severe and irreversible nature of the risks.	Enhanced due diligence: thorough risk assessment and ambitious preventive measures.
Science & the 1.5 °C goal	“Necessary measures” defined by the best available science and the 1.5 °C goal.	1.5 °C is the agreed primary temperature goal, informing all mitigation duties.	Best available science (IPCC) must guide the design and implementation of climate policy.
Mitigation	Duty to prevent, reduce and control emissions (Art. 194); the Paris Agreement does not replace UNCLOS.	NDCs must reflect the highest possible ambition; binding obligation of conduct to pursue them.	Mitigation targets at the highest possible ambition, set in binding instruments.
Regulation of private actors	—	Due diligence requires regulating public and private operators; impact assessments for significant activities.	States must legislate human-rights and environmental due diligence across business value chains.
Prevention & cooperation	Duty to prevent transboundary pollution (Art. 194(2)); duty to protect and preserve the marine environment (Art. 192).	Customary duty to prevent transboundary harm and to cooperate — “a pressing need and a legal obligation.”	Duty of non-retrogression and of international cooperation, especially toward vulnerable States.
Protection of the vulnerable	Particular concern for small island States especially exposed to climate harm.	—	Special protection for groups in vulnerable situations, Indigenous peoples, and environmental defenders.
Consequences of breach	—	Failure to act may be an internationally wrongful act entailing responsibility and full reparation; obligations owed erga omnes.	Rights violations engage State responsibility under the American Convention; duty to guarantee remedy and reparation.

H. Conclusions

This dossier set out to reframe the climate emergency as what it fundamentally is: not a distant environmental externality, but a present and systemic human rights crisis. The testimonies gathered here confirm that climate change operates as a “threat multiplier,” turning ecological degradation into concrete violations of the rights to life, health, water, food, culture, territory, and self-determination.

Read together, the frontlines reveal a shared architecture of injustice despite their contrasting geographies. In the Amazon, the erosion of an intact biome threatens the territorial and cultural survival of Indigenous peoples — most acutely those in voluntary isolation. In the Small Island Developing States of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific — from Mauritius and Rodrigues to the Solomon Islands — sea-level rise, water scarcity, and the loss of natural coastal defenses threaten the habitability of territory and, with it, statehood itself. In every case, the communities bearing the gravest consequences contributed the least to the crisis.

Crucially, the gap between this lived reality and its legal recognition is now closing. Three international courts converged on principles that vindicate the claims of frontline communities: emissions as pollution and transboundary harm; a stringent obligation of enhanced due diligence anchored in the best available science and the 1.5 °C threshold; prevention and cooperation as legal duties; and a clean, healthy environment as a precondition for human rights, owed *erga omnes* and extending to generations not yet born.

Yet legal recognition is not, by itself, redress. The advisory opinions supply the normative foundation, but their promise depends on implementation: on mitigation aligned with 1.5 °C, on adaptation finance that does not deepen the debt trap of vulnerable states, and on accountability mechanisms accessible to the communities these obligations are meant to protect. This dossier therefore closes not with a portrait of victimhood, but with a demand for partnership — recognizing frontline peoples as agents of a more just international order. Their message is, in the end, a simple one: responsibility must match harm.

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