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## Intercultural dialogue and engagement for sustainable climate action : applied research project 2024-2025

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APPLIED RESEARCH PROJECT 2024-2025

INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE  
AND ENGAGEMENT FOR  
**SUSTAINABLE  
CLIMATE ACTION**

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# Abbreviations

<b>ARP</b>	Applied Research Project
<b>CCC</b>	Catechism of the Catholic Church
<b>DPIHD</b>	Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development
<b>ICD</b>	Intercultural Dialogue
<b>IRD</b>	Interreligious Dialogue
<b>LD</b>	Laudate Deum
<b>Lsi</b>	Laudato Si'
<b>LSAP</b>	Laudato Si' Action Platform
<b>PCW</b>	Pacific Climate Warriors
<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SLR</b>	Sea Level Rise
<b>SPREP</b>	Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environmental Programme

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# 1. Introduction

Humanity faces unprecedented challenges from climate change. Rising temperatures, melting ice caps, sea level rise, and more frequent floods, droughts, and heatwaves threaten livelihoods worldwide. These crises demand collective, inclusive, and ethically grounded responses across cultures, nations, and belief systems.

While international agreements like the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide structural frameworks for climate governance, they often overlook the cultural, spiritual, and relational dimensions of sustainability. This highlights the need for approaches beyond technical solutions—integrating diverse worldviews, ethics, and lived experiences. In this context, intercultural dialogue emerges as a powerful yet underutilized tool for promoting sustainable lifestyles and fostering environmental justice.

Therefore, this research explores how intercultural dialogue (ICD) can contribute to sustainable climate action by amplifying ethical narratives, enabling solidarity, and integrating marginalized voices into climate discourse. It responds to critiques that dominant models—rooted in scientific rationalism and Western liberalism—overlook traditional knowledge, Indigenous frameworks, and spiritual worldviews (Sun & Shi, 2024; Arthur, 2011). By foregrounding dialogue as a method of knowledge co-production and ethical engagement, this study aims to bridge the gap between global policy frameworks and culturally rooted action.

The inquiry is situated within climate governance, civil society, and faith-based ecologism. It aligns with emerging scholarly and institutional recognition—such as that from UNESCO (2013), UNEP (2016), and the Council of Europe (2008)—that sustainable development requires intercultural competences and inclusive governance structures. At the same time, it interrogates the limitations of existing dialogue frameworks, especially their tendency to reproduce power imbalances, co-opt marginalized voices, or obscure inequalities under the guise of neutrality.

Through a narrative-analysis methodology, the research focuses on three case studies that exemplify the diverse forms and functions of ICD in environmental advocacy: Pope Francis' environmental leadership through *Laudato Si'*, the Shinnecock Indian Nation's grassroots land defense, and the Pacific Climate Warriors' youth-led activism. These case studies reflect how intercultural dialogue operates across diverse geographies, beliefs, and political arenas.

Pope Francis represents a top-down, faith-based intervention that has shaped global ecological discourse within Catholic and secular spaces alike. The Shinnecock Indian Nation's activism illustrates the intersection of land rights, Indigenous knowledge, and ecological justice, grounded in

community resilience and ancestral stewardship. The Pacific Climate Warriors offers a youth-led model merging storytelling, spirituality, and non-violent protest to spotlight existential threats to island nations. Together, these cases exemplify how ICD can be enacted at different scales—transnational, community-based, and grassroots—while confronting the shared challenge of climate injustice.

A narrative-analysis methodology was chosen to examine how stories and language shape perceptions, build alliances, and create meaning in intercultural climate initiatives. Unlike traditional policy analysis or statistical assessments, narrative analysis enables the exploration of how values, identity, and worldview are communicated, contested, and reimagined across cultural boundaries. It offers a way to trace the affective and ethical power of climate discourse—revealing how communities construct shared understandings of environmental crises, frame their actions in spiritual or moral terms, and mobilize solidarity through collective storytelling. This methodology also complements the study’s epistemological commitment to valuing non-Western, Indigenous, and faith-based knowledge systems that are often sidelined in mainstream climate debates.

The central questions guiding this research are: a) how can intercultural dialogue support sustainable climate action? and b) how can narrative approaches complement scientific and policy driven efforts for just climate futures? Ultimately, this research contributes to a more holistic understanding of environmental sustainability—one that sees dialogue not just as communication, but also as a transformative process fostering empathy, shared responsibility, and collective action amid imminent ecological collapse.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Intercultural Dialogue: Key Definitions, Concepts, and Theoretical Foundations**

#### **2.1.1. Intercultural Dialogue**

Although intercultural dialogue has gained significant importance and evolution in recent discourse—especially in the context of increased global interdependence and the rising urgency of addressing transnational challenges, such as climate change—there remains ambiguity about where intercultural dialogue truly originated and why it is often proposed as a crucial tool for addressing global issues. This literature review will examine which methods of intercultural dialogue have proven most effective and in what political or social contexts we could most benefit from strong and well-established intercultural dialogue.

Anthropologically, the philosophical foundations of intercultural dialogue can be traced back to Franz Boas's concept of "cultural relativism". Boas conceived the idea of cultural relativism as a response to Western ethnocentrism. In 1887 he defined culture as "the totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the behavior of the individuals composing a social group, collectively and individually, in relation to their natural environment, to other groups, to members of the group itself, and of each individual to himself" (Boas, 1963).

Boas argued that moral values must be understood within their specific cultural context. His concept of "cultural relativism", —though the term itself was coined by students— refrains from making value judgments about different cultures or comparing them against one another, as it does not establish universal criteria to assess the worth of any given culture (Hahn, 2023). Despite its limitations—such as the potential to be used as a pretext to condone human rights violations in certain contexts—the idea of cultural relativism encourages us to recognize that cultures are different, with varying social and ethical norms. It calls for rejecting any hierarchy or sense of superiority, instead promoting a horizontal relationship that fosters acceptance, tolerance, and an appreciation for diverse cultural beliefs and practices (Cherry, 2023). While it may be too simplistic to establish a direct link, this concept may have nonetheless played a role in shaping the broader ideas that eventually contributed to the development of intercultural dialogue.

The UNESCO defines Intercultural Dialogue (ICD) as "a transformative process promoting mutual respect, empathy, and the willingness to understand different perspectives" (UNESCO, 2023). This perspective highlights ICD not merely as a communication tool, but as a deeply relational and ethical engagement that supports peaceful coexistence and fosters inclusive societies. ICD is perceived as a process aimed at fostering "transformative communication" between cultures and identities. This process is driven by values, as it requires participants to commit to principles of mutual respect, empathy, and a readiness to "shift perspectives" (Woodin et al., 2011). For addressing current "power imbalances" and facilitating meaningful dialogue it is crucial to gain a full understanding of historical legacies (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

The Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (2008) builds upon this premise by positioning ICD as a strategic mechanism for promoting democratic governance, equality, and human rights. It defines intercultural dialogue as "*a process that comprises open and respectful exchange of views between individuals, groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect*" (Council of Europe, 2008). The Council recognizes that assimilation-based approaches to integrating culturally diverse populations have largely failed, particularly in societies where cultural diversity has significantly increased. It argues that relying solely on principles such as pluralism—understood as the peaceful

coexistence of diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious communities within a shared society (Council of Europe, 2008)—along with tolerance and broadmindedness, may not be sufficient to ensure genuine intercultural inclusion. This recognition has led to the emergence of intercultural dialogue (ICD) as a new paradigm for, as the Council of Europe argued, “only dialogue allows people to live in unity in diversity”.

### **2.1.2. Issues around the Lack of Intercultural Dialogue**

The lack of intercultural dialogue (ICD) poses significant risks to peace, inclusion, and sustainable development, particularly in multicultural and conflict-prone societies. According to the *We Need to Talk* report by UNESCO and the Institute for Economics and Peace (2022), nearly 89% of active conflicts worldwide occur in countries with low levels of intercultural dialogue infrastructure and capacity.

This alarming figure highlights the correlation between the absence of inclusive communication frameworks and the proliferation of violence, societal polarization, and governance breakdowns. The report further categorizes countries based on their ICD readiness, drawing from indicators such as freedom of expression, inclusive education, civic participation, and government transparency. Countries with weak structural and supporting environments for ICD seem not only to experience more violent conflict but also to demonstrate higher levels of social exclusion, ethnic tension, and political instability (UNESCO & IEP, 2022).

This trend is not coincidental. As emphasized by international conflict researchers, dialogue deficits often compound long-standing grievances rooted in colonial histories, identity suppression, and unequal access to political and economic resources (Elias A., 2017). Where dialogue mechanisms are absent, minority communities are more likely to experience systemic marginalization, cultural erasure, and state-led violence.

Moreover, the absence of ICD also affects transnational cooperation. Climate diplomacy, for instance, requires the coordination of culturally diverse actors ranging from Indigenous communities to state negotiators and civil society leaders. Without the tools to navigate differing values, worldviews, and communication styles, these partnerships may be undermined by mistrust or misrepresentation (Woodin, Lundgren, & Castro, 2011).

Investing in intercultural learning has been linked to greater social cohesion, democratic participation, and resilience to hate speech and disinformation. The lack of ICD is therefore not merely a communication gap, but a systemic vulnerability that affects democratic institutions, peacebuilding efforts, and sustainable development goals. As Kamali-Chirani (2019) notes, intercultural dialogue must be embedded structurally—in laws, institutions, education, and public

discourse—rather than treated as a soft diplomacy tool. The alternative is conducive to a perpetuation of conflict-prone environments, siloed communities, and policy responses that fail to address root causes of disunity.

### **2.1.3. The Role of Intercultural Dialogue in Influencing Climate Action**

Intercultural dialogue has become an increasingly recognized and promoted tool in addressing complex environmental issues, particularly in contexts where diverse cultural, epistemological, and spiritual perspectives converge. Organizations such as UNESCO and the Open Dialogues International Foundation have actively supported initiatives that frame intercultural dialogue as a mechanism not only for fostering mutual understanding but also for co-producing sustainable solutions to shared ecological challenges.

UNESCO, for instance, launched the initiative “*Intercultural Dialogue to Protect Shared Environmental Heritage*,” which emphasizes the need to reconcile cultural diversity with the protection of ecosystems. The project encourages cross-community collaboration in ecologically sensitive areas, such as transboundary biosphere reserves and World Heritage sites, and highlights the importance of integrating local cultural values into environmental governance frameworks. By promoting heritage-based dialogue, UNESCO supports the idea that diverse communities can co-manage natural resources while respecting each other's traditions, values, and spiritual connections to the land (UNESCO, 2023).

Similarly, the Open Dialogues International Foundation has spearheaded projects like “*Open Dialogues on Climate Change*”, which aims to bring together youth, Indigenous peoples, and civil society actors from across the globe to reflect on climate change from their unique cultural perspectives. Through participatory roundtables, storytelling, and art-based methods, these dialogues have succeeded in generating collective insights that challenge dominant technocratic narratives and instead reframe climate change as a culturally embedded and morally urgent issue. Their approach reflects a growing recognition that climate policies must be informed not only by scientific evidence but also by the lived experiences and ethical worldviews of diverse communities (Open Dialogues International Foundation, 2022).

These initiatives underscore how intercultural dialogue can be useful for uncovering shared values, building trust, and enabling collaboration in situations where political, cultural, or historical barriers may otherwise prevent effective cooperation. By emphasizing reciprocal listening, cultural humility, and co-creation, ICD transforms environmental discourse from a top-down, expert-driven process into a participatory, inclusive, and pluralistic endeavor.

Policy-focused literature also acknowledges the strategic potential of dialogue frameworks. The World Bank's *Designing Dialogue for Climate Action* (2017) outlines six guiding principles—urgency, inclusion, awareness, efficiency, transparency, and accountability—for fostering public-private engagement. While not explicitly intercultural, this approach aligns with the case studies' emphasis on trust, representation, and participation. The *Interfaith Rainforest Initiative and Faith for Earth* (UNEP) further demonstrate how religious leaders and communities are key players in global environmental governance. Le Duc (2023) argues that interreligious dialogue offers a necessary foundation for “environmental flourishing,” stressing the shared moral responsibility of faith traditions to protect the Earth. This supports the proposition that IRD can be a bridge between global policy goals (e.g., SDGs) and local ethical practices.

From a psychological perspective, Weimer (2019) shows that values such as “universalism” are predictive of pro-environmental behavior. This resonates with the ethical thrust of ICD/IRD, where values like empathy, care, and relationality are cultivated not through rational argumentation alone, but through cultural and spiritual storytelling. Kanter (2022) supports this view by illustrating how stories—especially those rooted in tradition—can inspire reflection, shared identity, and action.

#### **2.1.4. Religious Dialogue and Engagement**

Interreligious dialogue (IRD) is often framed as a particular value-laden form of engagement between individuals that holds special relevance in the context of religiously pluralistic societies where different faith traditions coexist, sometimes in tension. This form of engagement extends beyond exchange of customs and traditions to include moral, theological, and existential dimensions that are often central to people's identities. It plays a critical role in fostering trust, reducing interfaith animosity, and advancing peace in settings where religious difference has historically contributed to social fragmentation or conflict. As Phan explained: “the objective of interreligious dialogue is not to merge all world religions into a singular global religion, but rather to address the potential for violence and animosity that may arise from religious differences” (Phan, 2012, as cited in Le Duc, 2023).

While the Council of Europe (2008) includes interreligious dialogue (IRD) within its broader framework for intercultural dialogue (ICD), encouraging religious communities to uphold human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, some scholars have critiqued the limits of this approach. James Arthur (2011), for instance, argues that ICD as implemented by institutions such as the Council often remains constrained by a secular, liberal framework that avoids engaging with the doctrinal truth claims of religious traditions. In this sense, he contends that only IRD—when practiced authentically—“takes religions and religious differences seriously” and holds the potential to cultivate genuinely shared ethical values across belief systems.

Anthony Le Duc (2023) expands on the role of IRD by arguing that it is not only relevant but essential for addressing environmental crises. He emphasizes that IRD creates a space where individuals and communities from diverse religious backgrounds can discover shared moral and spiritual commitments to environmental stewardship. Rather than simply recognizing that ecological problems like climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss affect all people, Le Duc suggests that IRD enables the articulation of common ethical responses rooted in faith traditions.

## **2.2. Challenges and Limitations to Intercultural Dialogue**

A significant conceptual limitation of intercultural dialogue (ICD) lies in its tendency to become overly broad and vague. When used as a catch-all category to describe any form of cross-cultural interaction, ICD risks losing its analytical sharpness. This breadth can make it difficult to distinguish between the very different modes, objectives, and power dynamics embedded in various forms of dialogue—such as those between faith-based groups, Indigenous communities, or public-private actors. As a result, the concept may inadvertently flatten complex differences and overlook the specificities that shape meaningful exchange. Without further typologizing or contextual nuance, ICD runs the risk of becoming “more unhelpful than helpful” in assessing its actual impact on policy or climate action. This critique urges scholars and practitioners to interrogate the contexts, intentions, and actors involved in dialogue processes, and to resist universalizing the term as inherently positive or effective.

Despite its transformative potential for fostering inclusive, ethical, and collaborative responses to global challenges such as climate change, social fragmentation, and cultural exclusion, intercultural dialogue faces several challenges on a structural and conceptual level. A major critique is the persistence of Western-centric frameworks that dominate ICD theory and practice. The ICD framework of the Council of Europe, though progressive, has been critiqued for implicitly embodying secular and liberal values that may not align with the lived experiences of religious or Indigenous communities (Arthur, 2011). This creates a tension where public institutions, under the guise of neutrality, fail to acknowledge the “unique truth” claims of religious communities, thereby undermining genuine respect for pluralism.

Another challenge lies in the tokenistic or instrumental use of dialogue mechanisms. ICD can sometimes be co-opted as a form of greenwashing, masking structural inequalities or policy failures with symbolic engagement. This concern is echoed by Le Duc (2023), who warns that without clear ethical grounding and inclusive representation, dialogue efforts risk reproducing existing hierarchies rather than transforming them.

Furthermore, the empirical data on the effectiveness of ICD remains limited, especially in terms of measurable outcomes. The *We Need to Talk* report (UNESCO & Institute for Economics and Peace, 2022) provides one of the first attempts to systematically measure ICD across 160 countries, using structural and supporting domains. However, it acknowledges that “supporting domains” such as leadership and values often underperform, reflecting a gap between policy and practice.

A more epistemological limitation stems from the dual structure of globalization. Sun and Shi (2024) describe the coexistence of “centralization and decentralization” and “homogenization and hybridization” as creating complex cultural orders where ICD must operate. This duality complicates the formation of universal ethical standards and challenges researchers to avoid reinforcing Western epistemologies while striving for global applicability.

Finally, a significant gap in the literature concerns the spatial and temporal dimensions of ICD. Shaw and Coles (2014) demonstrate how sustainable practices vary significantly across different sites—home, holiday, and travel—highlighting that intercultural practices are not uniform but shaped by context-specific social norms, infrastructures, and values. Without addressing these nuances, ICD risks being overly abstract or detached from lived realities.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

This research seeks to provide actionable insights on *what role can intercultural engagement and dialogue play in shaping global climate policies to be sustainable?* By “sustainable” we understand “effective” and “inclusive”. By identifying 'diversity' and 'inclusivity' as the backbone of intercultural engagement and dialogue on climate change, it aims to shed light on the specific contributions that a variety of underrepresented voices can bring to the table of international decision-making processes for global climate action.

#### **Justification**

The research identifies “narrative” as the core concept in the context of climate change, given that it is widely recognized that it is the narratives—rather than the climate data itself—that play a crucial role in either motivating or hindering climate action (Fløttum and Gjerstad 2017). The narrative-analysis has merits given that socially constructed "stories," known as narratives, organize events and phenomena into a coherent worldview, helping to make sense of them (van der Leeuw 2019). By doing so, narratives shape preferences and opinions giving direction to human action (Fløttum and Gjerstad 2017).

The design and methodology of the research paper involves a narrative-analysis approach for the selected three case studies. Narrative analysis is a useful method to extract meaningful insights from nuanced qualitative data. The approach is focused on understanding stories or accounts, how individuals construct and interpret their experiences. By nature, it is inherently interpretative, yet aims to understand the structure of a narrative and the meaning it conveys, within special cultural, socioeconomic, community, personal contexts. Narrative analysis explores storytelling elements such as plot, characters, time, settings, conflicts and resolutions to gain insight into how people make sense of their experiences.

Building on the three case studies, a collective analysis was conducted to identify specificities as well as commonalities, from which to derive policy recommendations. The scope of the research focuses on how intercultural dialogue influences multilateral decision-making processes in the climate issue, rather than on influencing individual's lifestyles.

### **Literature review implications for the methodology**

The methodology is tailored to answer the question, *what role can intercultural engagement and dialogue play in shaping global climate policies to be sustainable?* It is informed by the insights gained from the literature review. From it, the team concluded that intercultural dialogue and engagement are terms too-encompassing to be informative in and of themselves. Moreover, applying these umbrella terms indiscriminately to a variety of cultural perspectives risks undermining what the concepts stand for.

Furthermore, even when these broad categories can be further specified by more specific terms –such as “interreligious”, “indigenous”, or “community” dialogue and engagement–, the application of these terms do not seem to satisfactorily describe the reality of what they seek to describe. If one goes to specific cases, one will find that several categories of engagement inevitably overlap, making it difficult to grasp what gives a specific type of intercultural engagement its specificity. Faced with this underlying difficulty of defining what intercultural dialogue and engagement can be, the team concluded that the most appropriate road of investigation would be the following:

Instead of directly answering the research question, the study will seek to descriptively thematize specific approaches by anchoring itself solely in an analysis of the case studies. This will constitute the study's first contribution. The team considers that the exercise of analysing apparently diverse ways of engaging in climate action through dialogue, and putting them in relation to each other is the first step needed to begin to elucidate the reality of their diversity, as well as the specific

contributions that they can bring to the table of international decision-making processes for global climate action.

Lastly, methodological inclusivity must extend to linguistic and cultural representation. A key limitation of this literature review is its reliance on English-language sources, which inevitably narrows the scope of perspectives and epistemologies considered. Important insights from Indigenous, local, and non-Western scholars may be overlooked due to language barriers. Future research must prioritize multilingual engagement and translation practices that are faithful to the original meanings and cultural contexts of knowledge, rather than assimilating them into dominant discourses.

The methodological terrain for studying intercultural and interreligious dialogue in climate action is as much ethical and relational as it is analytical. It demands humility, openness to epistemic plurality, and a commitment to research practices that respect and reflect the diversity of worldviews engaged in the struggle for environmental justice and climate action.

### 3.2. Case Studies Selection

The Pacific Climate Warriors, the Shinnecock Indian Nations and Pope Francis’s ethical leadership were selected as case studies based on a set of selection criteria designed to identify initiatives that represent diverse, underrepresented, and culturally distinct voices in climate change action. The following criteria were used to guide the selection process:

Selection Criteria	Pope Francis Ethical Leadership	Pacific Climate Warriors	Shinnecock Indian Nation
1. Does the case provide a clear and compelling rationale for broadening climate decision-making to include considerations of diversity and inclusion?	✓	✓	✓
2. Does the case represent voices and perspectives from communities that are traditionally marginalized or underrepresented in climate discourse?	✓ Religious voices	✓ Youth and peripheral islanders	✓ Indigenous traditional knowledge
3. Does the case illuminate the directional dynamics of intercultural dialogue and engagement, such as top-down, grassroots, or horizontal forms?	✓ Top-down	✓ Grassroot	✓ Top-down grassroots

4. Does the case address the complexities and tensions of intercultural dialogue, such as conflicting interest, divergent worldviews, or differing cultural values?	✓	✓	✓
5. Does the case illuminate or help challenge existing power dynamics in climate-decision making processes, such as who defines the problem, who is heard, and who takes the lead?	✓	✓	✓
6. Does the case represent a specific geographic and/or cultural context that contributes to regional diversity across the selected case studies?	✓	✓	✓

### 3.3. Data Collection

Preliminary research for this study was conducted using a combination of desk research, academic literature review, and analysis of publicly available materials to build a foundational understanding of intercultural dialogue within the context of climate change activism. This included reviewing theoretical frameworks on intercultural communication as well as case-specific literature related to Indigenous advocacy, faith-based ecological movement, and youth-driven grassroots climate movements. Secondary sources such as academic journal articles, reports by international organisations, news media, and interviews published by third parties were consulted to gather insights on the selected case study subjects.

Interviewees were identified based on their involvement in the selected case studies, and their relevance to climate advocacy, and community representation. Initial contact was made through multiple outreach channels, including email, LinkedIn, social media platforms (e.g. Instagram) and professional referrals. The outreach message included an introduction to the research, ethical considerations along with informed consent, and a request to participate in a virtual interview.

All interviews were conducted via a video conferencing platform Webex. A list of guiding questions was developed to structure the interviews while remaining flexible to adapt to each participant's background and context. Key guiding questions included:

1. What role has intercultural dialogue played in shaping your advocacy work, and how has it influenced your approach to engaging with diverse stakeholders?
2. What are the essential components of constructive and meaningful intercultural dialogue?

3. How have cultural misunderstandings or misrepresentations impacted the effectiveness of your intercultural dialogue efforts, and what strategies have you found effective in addressing these challenges?
4. What measures can be taken to ensure dialogue avoids tokenism or superficial participation?
5. Despite your efforts to advance the conversation around climate change action, what recurring challenges do you face in ensuring your message is genuinely heard, understood, or acted upon by broader audiences?
6. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of intercultural dialogue initiatives in your work? Are there any specific tools, frameworks, or indicators you use—or would recommend—to assess their impact?

Follow-up questions were asked as needed to elicit deeper insights or clarify specific experiences shared by interviewees. With the consent of participants, interviews were recorded and later transcribed manually, with the aid of AI transcription tools to support accuracy and efficiency. All data was anonymized where requested to protect participant privacy.

## **4. Case Studies**

### **4.1. Religious Engagement: Pope Francis' Leadership in the Fight for Climate Action**

#### **4.1.1. Introduction**

From the moment he was selected in 2013, Pope Francis has had the climate and ecological crises as one of the most fundamental topics of his agenda. A few months in advance of the 2015 COP in Paris he published his encyclical letter *Laudato si*, in which, he (1) presents a very detailed exposition of the Catholic Church's stance on the relationship of humans with the environment, and their corresponding duties in behaving towards it, in light of the pressing ecological and climate crises (2) makes an appeal not just to Catholics but to all humankind to take decisive action on taking care of our common home.

Since the publication of *Laudato si* along with the speech he gave in the UN New York Headquarters in the 70th session of the General Assembly, Pope Francis attracted a lot of mediatic attention and gained a widespread reputation as one of the most active global leaders in the fight against climate change. Moreover, by some he has been considered the most prominent figure engaging in the global conversation on climate from a religious perspective (Mazzoleni, 2025).

Pope Francis's engagement with climate action is notable not only for the significant amount of attention it has garnered, but also because of the specific way in which he has done so. Pope Francis's moral leadership on climate action has been remarkable for the central role he has given to dialogue in his engagement, and his focus in establishing or facilitating communication bridges across actors of different positionalities of power, culture and relationship with the climate issue.

This case study consists of analyzing the way in which Pope Francis' leadership has had an influence in driving impactful global climate action. More specifically, it seeks to examine the ways in which Francis has leveraged his influence and power as a leader in facilitating dialogue and fostering inclusivity within climate negotiations. It seeks to analyze the role that dialogue has played in these efforts, and the ways in which it might have fostered sustainable climate solutions.

#### **4.1.2. Pope Francis' Religious Engagement: Narrative Dimension**

In this section, a sketch will be drawn of the narrative through which Pope Francis frames the problem of the climate and ecological crises. Before anything else, it is important to note that we will not discuss Francis in his capacity as the head of State of Vatican City, but rather as the head of the Holy See, that is, in his capacity as the head of the Catholic Church. This however, does not mean that we will not discuss the political dimension in his moral leadership.<sup>1</sup>

The Holy See approaches this topic mainly through its religious worldview, from a moral lens. Historically, the Holy See's main concern on environmental issues has been *the integral development of the human person*:

*In all her being and actions, the Church is called to promote the integral development of the human person in the light of the Gospel. This development takes place by attending to the inestimable goods of justice, peace, and the care of creation. (DPIHD, n.d.).*

In this, Pope Francis follows the lines of all his predecessors from the first time a Pope gave a speech to one of the United Nations mandates as multilateral discussions around the environment first came up (at the FAO HQs, in 1951). In the context of sustainable development, all Popes have continuously expressed a serious concern for the care of the environment, albeit always grounding their reasons for it in the moral concern for the welfare of the human person, and especially of the most vulnerable individuals in societies (Lai and Tortajada, 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> Since the Holy See is seated in the Vatican City-State, it could be thought that it has its own public administrative agenda to fulfill in relation to managing its territory. Indeed, the Vatican City-State has joined the climate conversation by joining the UNFCCC as a member state on 2022 (cf. Holy See Press Office, 2022). However, it is important to remember the distinction of the Vatican as a City-State, and the Holy See, as the governing body of a religious community.

More specifically, the Holy See's statements on the environment have always been expressed from a place of alignment with the social doctrine teachings of the Catholic Church, which stem from the principle of the absolute value of human life. This value comes from the premise that human beings are God's creation. In the same way, the rest of God's creation also carries an inherent value. However, human life has a special value, or dignity, for they are the creatures that were created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) (CCC, 1993).

This stress on the special value of human life over others opens up the possibility of reading the Catholic perspective on the human-nature relationship as radically anthropocentric and thus not truly concerned with caring for the creation, except derivatively. However, in his speeches at the UN, Pope John Paul II (1978-2005) made a point to stress the importance of framing issues of sustainable development from the consideration of the welfare of the environment and inseparable from that of humans. He emphasized the interdependence of the human with his natural environment and the intrinsic value of both as God's creation (John Paul II, 1989). Thus, the moral responsibility for taking care of it.

In framing the relationship between humans and nature, Pope Francis has followed in John Paul II's footsteps. However, he has gone a step further, by presenting a whole moral theology that stems from a renewed conception of the human as radically interconnected with the rest of the Creation. This moral theology system is presented for the first time in *Laudato si*, and it is expressed by the concept of «integral ecology» (para. 10).

Francis sketched this anthropological vision in the context of considering the climate and ecological crises. According to Francis, the problem lies in the anthropological conception that sets the foundation for what he calls the “technocratic paradigm” in today's global culture. As Francis summarized in *Laudate Deum* (2023), this paradigm consists in a certain way of understanding human life and activity that “[...] consists in thinking “as if reality, goodness and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such” (Lsi, para. 105). As a logical consequence, it then becomes easy “to accept the idea of infinite or unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology” (Lsi, para. 106)” (Francis, LD 2023, para. 20).

As a concept of moral theology, «integral ecology» has both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically speaking, integral ecology implies an anthropology that still considers the human being's special dignity as being created *imago Dei*. But at the same time, it is an understanding of the human that understands herself in the bigger context of the ecological system of creation, whereby she is called to consider all other creatures as “her brothers and sisters”, and behave according to this found reverence towards God and His creation.

The practical implications derive straight from the theoretical: since the root of the problem is of a moral nature, and so is the solution. Since the understanding of the human relationship to nature from the “technocratic paradigm” as detached as versus interconnected is at the root of the problem, “To seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to mask the true and deepest problems of the global system.” (Lsi, para. 111).

This has two key consequences. Today’s social and environmental problems (1) Must be thought of through an ecological perspective; (2) can only be solved through an “ecological conversion” of society.<sup>2</sup> When considering humanity within an ecological system, this implies, notably, a universally shared responsibility that engages all of us, since it is our *common home*. That implies a universal call for “ecological conversion” and subsequent action.

This responsibility is at the time towards other humans as well as towards the rest of Creation. Here, it is worth pointing out another contribution of Pope Francis to the Holy See’s narrative on environmental concerns: that is, the clear way in which he specifically ties the issue of ecological crisis with that of structural social justice. Thus, the moral responsibility to care for the environment goes hand in hand with that of acting towards remedying human structural injustice (Lsi, para. 49).

#### **4.1.3. Pope Francis’ Religious Engagement: Action Dimension**

Pope Francis has translated his specific understanding and concern of the climate and ecological crises into action. Since the publication of *Laudato si*, he has continued and extended his engagement with the fight against climate change by participating or leading a plethora of initiatives around it.

This includes engagement within the Catholic Church, but is not limited to it. Indeed, Pope Francis has distinguished himself for his adamant willingness to establish dialogue and collaborative links with actors that represent different perspectives, responsibilities and necessities in the climate issue. For the purposes of this research, we will specifically discuss the actions Pope Francis has taken in order to create or facilitate spaces for dialogue and engagement among individuals and communities from diverse positionalities, using his leverage as a moral and a global leader.

One can think of the Pope as having three key channels of influence from which he engages in efforts for facilitating spaces for dialogue and building networks: first, himself in his direct engagement as a religious leader; second, the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development at the Holy See; and third, the *Laudato si* Movement as a grassroots initiative by members of the

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<sup>2</sup> “An ecological conversion means moving toward a greater love of God, each other, and creation by acknowledging our contribution to the ecological crisis and acting in ways that heal our common home.”

Church community. In his direct engagement as a leader, we will highlight 2 main avenues: engagement with the UN system and engagement directly with the world at large (when he addresses himself to “all the People of good will”).

On the one hand, with the UN system, Pope Francis has attempted to leverage the historical ties of the Holy See with the UN system. The Holy See holds the status of Permanent Observer to the United Nations, and Popes have been frequently invited to speak to the General Assembly, since 1965 (with Pope Paul VI) (Francis, 2015b). As one can see from looking at documents such as the speeches prepared by Francis at COP28 and 29, he leverages this positionality to bring a moral perspective to the multilateral secular and political conversations in climate change negotiations. He also importantly uses his voice to bring up issues faced by the most affected communities facing the damaging consequences of climate change, as their standpoints and concerns are often also underrepresented.

On the other hand, the most prominent example of his direct engagement with the world at large are the publication of his *Laudato si'* and *Laudate Deum*. Their content has already been discussed in the above section. Here it is just worth noting that the impact of these documents has had enough reception and generated enough provocation to be considered in themselves one of the most meaningful aspects of Pope Francis' engagement in climate action.

The second channel of engagement for Pope Francis is the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development (DPIHD). Established in 2016, it merged 4 previous pontifical councils, and its mission is «to express the Church's solicitude in the fields of justice, peace, the safeguarding of all of Creation, as well as in those that concern health and works of charity» (DPIHD, n.d.).

The Dicastery has acted as the most direct medium for Pope Francis to put his understanding of and the solutions to the root cause of the climate and ecological crises into action. On the one hand, the Dicastery has served as the implementer of some of the Holy See's projects for climate action. Most notably, it was responsible for having co-launched the *Laudato si' Action Platform* in 2021. That is a digital “shared space where the Church develops a bold and active response to the ecological crisis” (LSAP, n.d.), in the spirit of “integral ecology. The platform offers concrete action guides, tools and support to individuals, families and communities seeking to commit the teachings from *Laudato si'* into action. It is open to everyone that wants to join, beyond Catholics. The *Laudato Si' Action Platform* shows Francis's willingness to leap from mere narrative/argument into concrete action.

On the other hand, the Dicastery has acted both as a liaison between the Holy See and other potential actors engaging in climate action from varied cultural and political contexts, to facilitate collaboration among them.

Lastly, the Laudato si movement has been another important channel for Pope Francis to spread his engagement, from the Catholic Church to individuals and organizations outside the Catholic community. The Laudato si movement is a grassroots organization formed by Catholic laity that seeks to put into action Pope Francis' calling in *Laudato si*. The movement has leveraged the widespread infrastructure of the Catholic Church across the world to connect individuals across regions and cultures and guide them in the journey to "ecological conversion".

Pope Francis has leveraged the network infrastructure of both the Dicastery and the Laudato si Movement by generating some joint collaborations that allow him to expand his influence even further. The most notable example for our research topic is Pope's documentary *The Letter: A Message for Our Earth*. A documentary which gathers actors engaged in the climate crisis from all sides of the problem and with very different backgrounds in a single conversation around climate change. Pope Francis's engagement with the climate cause goes well beyond these examples and specific types of collaboration.<sup>3</sup> We will however constrain ourselves to the ones mentioned, due to the scope of this research project.

#### **4.1.4. Impact and Challenges in Fostering Inclusivity in Climate Action**

In which sense can Pope Francis's efforts have fostered sustainable climate action? These shall be discussed in detail directly in the individual analysis of the case study section. As for the challenges, the key issue is the fact that despite all his efforts, summed up with those of the rest of those engaged in the issue, climate multilateral negotiations have failed to reach their goals. This disappointment is reflected in his *Laudate Deum*... "Eight years have passed since I published the Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si*", when I wanted to share with all of you, my brothers and sisters of our suffering planet, my heartfelt concerns about the care of our common home. Yet, with the passage of time, I have realized that our responses have not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point." (LD, para. 2).

As for Pope Francis's particular type of engagement, the challenges he seems to face are:

(a) Moral authority can be lost (b) Soft power still can only go so far; (c) his message can be drowned in the sea of information on social media (d) Can the force of technocratic paradigm actually be eroded?

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<sup>3</sup> Out of which it's important to remark Pope Francis's efforts to strengthen collaboration links with other religious leaders in the fight against climate change.

## 4.2. The Shinnecock Indian Nation's Restoration of Relationship with Nature

### 4.2.1. Introduction

The Shinnecock Indian Nation is one of the oldest self-governing tribes, located in Suffolk County, New York, on the Shinnecock Reservation. In their Algonquian language, the Shinnecock name roughly translates to "people of the stony shore" in English. Geographically, it is situated between Hampton Bays and Southampton, New York. The Shinnecock Nation's territory spans about 1,000 acres, and they traditionally spoke a dialect of the Algonquian language. According to the 2020 Decennial Census, the population of the Shinnecock Nation is 819. The Nation has a deep connection to the land and water, with a long history dating back over 10,000 years. This strong bond to nature is passed down through generations within the Shinnecock people, as it is reflected in the Shinnecock Environmental Department's official statement: "The Shinnecock People have always defined themselves through their connection to ancestral *ohke* (land) and *nipi* (water)." This connection is further emphasized by Shinnecock historians and activists, who state, "It is our very existence that the environment depends upon to thrive."

Climate change disproportionately affects communities, especially Indigenous peoples, whose survival is deeply tied to the ecosystems they depend on, and they often face direct impacts as a result (UNDESA, 2021). The Shinnecock Nation is no exception in this narrative. The Nation's *Land Use Plan* outlines several key environmental priorities, including preserving open spaces, restoring native plants, protecting air and water quality, and promoting sustainable land development. Among them, the research has identified water justice, particularly in the form of Sea Level Rise (SLR), as the primary environmental concern, posing an immediate threat to the Shinnecock community due to its geographic location.

The challenges faced by the Shinnecock Indian Nation can be understood through both the lenses of environmental justice and ecological justice. Environmental justice stems from the call to address the wrongdoings of prevailing practices that have led to a triple planetary crisis—climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution (UNDP, 2022). These interconnected crises not only degrade the environment but also violate human rights and intensify injustices, particularly for vulnerable and marginalized communities (UNDP, 2022).

In this context, the former is contextualised within the colonial history of the United States, where the Shinnecock people have endured land grabs, population loss, poverty, marginalization, and other threats to their existence from colonialism and, later, from the lack of employment opportunities (Hirsch, 2021), particularly in relation to what is now Southampton Town. The latter goes beyond the experiential boundaries of the Shinnecock Nation, as ecologism is a political ideology that asserts the

non-human world deserves moral consideration, and that this principle should influence social, economic, and political structures (Baxter, 1999). The Shinnecock's challenge lies in how to harmonize Indigenous traditional wisdom with a global context in a way that leads to concrete action. From the perspective of ecological justice, their concerns do not remain internal but rather extend outward, calling for solidarity and collective action.

While it is crucial to examine the power dynamics and tensions that have existed in the region to understand why the Indigenous community initiated an intercultural dialogue with their presumed counterparts—and, further, with the world—the intention of this case study is not to focus on the root causes or conflict patterns between the two neighbors in depth. Rather, it aims to shed light on the Shinnecock Nation's engagement in climate action and how they are working to transform the way we value our relationship with nature. It also explores the narratives they use to better convey the significance of Indigenous practices, which have often been inadvertently overlooked by policymakers and the public. This lack of recognition stems from the failure of international instruments to acknowledge the value and importance of Indigenous knowledge in the past. The case study has two primary objectives: to explore the Shinnecock Nation's climate actions and examine how intercultural dialogue was shaped, who it was directed toward; second, to build upon this understanding, to see whether this exchange evolved into a deeper, more active form of interaction.

#### **4.2.2. Shinnecock's Intercultural Dialogue: Narrative Dimension**

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) presents an economic and ecological argument for the inclusion of Indigenous people in global climate decision-making:

*Indigenous peoples are stewards of the world's biodiversity and cultural diversity. Although they account for only around 5 percent of the world's population, they effectively manage an estimated 20-25 percent of the Earth's land surface. This land coincides with areas that hold 80 per cent of the planet's biodiversity and about 40 per cent of all terrestrial protected areas and ecologically intact landscapes. Indigenous peoples therefore play a key role in efforts to protect the planet and biodiversity.*

While policy decisions should not be based solely on numerical data, these figures underscore the fact that Indigenous knowledge systems, land stewardship practices, and legal traditions are essential to achieving sustainable climate solutions. However, the historical exclusion of Indigenous Peoples from legal and political recognition continues to shape their marginalization in environmental decision-making today.

As a coastal nation located along the Atlantic shores of present-day Long Island, the Shinnecock have always understood the land and water not as resources to be owned, but as living relatives to be protected. “I was taught that water is alive. It can hear. It holds memories,” *Kelsey Leonard* shared, illustrating the profound spiritual and cultural relationship with the water. In her speech at Change Now 2024 she brought a water vessel, with hopes of allowing the water to remember the words spoken in the presence.

### **Restoring our Relationship with Nature: A Narrative of Ecological Restoration and Water Justice**

This way of interpreting nature challenges dominant legal systems that continue to legitimize ecological degradation. In the face of climate change and biodiversity loss, the Shinnecock Nation invites the world to restore our relationship with nature—to begin, they are advocating for the legal personhood of water and incorporating tribe law into the existing law. This narrative centers ecological justice through the lens of Indigenous law as these legal shifts are deeply aligned with traditional ecological knowledge. The question was posed:

“What if instead of asking ‘What is water?’ We asked, “Who is water?”

By answering that question, the Shinnecock are conveying a message that we need to fundamentally transform the way in which we value water. This shift in narrative proposes a reorientation of law and governance, so their advocacy is not only about the survival of their people and their land, but also about the survival of the people and the planet alike.

While seemingly radical to dominant legal paradigms, the concept of rights of nature is deeply rooted in Indigenous legal traditions. These systems are grounded in a biocentric worldview that recognizes nonhuman entities—such as plants, animals, rivers, and lands—as living relations, inherently protected under law. However, colonial interventions—particularly legal prohibitions against Indigenous languages—disrupted this relational framework.

One Shinnecock historian and activist, underscores this point in an interview for the *Shinnecock Portrait Project*, stating: “Many of the first laws in the old colonial settlements interrupted our biocentric lifestyles. Removing Indigenous peoples from that lifestyle has significantly affected our earth. Many people focus on colonization’s impact on Indigenous people, but it’s essential to understand that the environment was equally impacted.” Her insight reveals the interdependence between cultural sovereignty and ecological health. When colonial legal systems displaced Indigenous legal orders, they not only marginalized Indigenous peoples but also degraded the ecosystems that were sustained by Indigenous law. In this context, the preservation of Indigenous language becomes more of an environmental imperative. As she further notes, “When language is removed from a

people, the culture of a people fades.” This illustrates how the loss of traditional ecological vocabulary—intimately tied to language and memory—has led to a disconnection from ancestral knowledge systems and the environmental stewardship embedded within them.

The story of the Shinnecock Nation also reveals how deeply rooted water injustice is in systemic neglect. As a coastal Indigenous community, the Shinnecock people live surrounded by water—yet many members lack reliable access to clean, drinkable tap water. This contradiction exposes the stark reality that proximity to water does not guarantee water justice. Leonard, in an interview with *The Opt-In*, made it clear that water entitlements in the U.S.—often taken for granted by those with easy access to clean water—can perpetuate harm through unconscious complicity.

She connects with the listener by sharing a personal story that resonates with many Indigenous families:

“We’re (Shinnecock) not born into the existence of being able to turn on the tap... we never drink out of the tap. It was always bottled water.”

For the Shinnecock, bottled water is not a matter of preference, but a necessity—a reflection of longstanding infrastructure neglect and environmental injustice. Through this case, the Shinnecock Nation challenges us to confront uncomfortable truths: that water access in America is not universally guaranteed. This is another reason the Shinnecock has been vocal in her call to recognize water as a legal person with its own rights—a principle already embraced by some Indigenous communities and recognized in legal systems in Whanganui River in Aotearoa, in New Zealand, and the Ganges River in India both in 2017.

The Shinnecock Nation, once occupying much larger tracts of land, now resides on 1,000 acres after being gradually pushed back by local settlers. Jeremy Dennis, a Shinnecock photographer whose work is tied into his identity and community, voiced concern in an interview with us about his tribe’s ongoing struggle to retain their land. This struggle, however, extends beyond the physical loss of territory—it also involves reclaiming the narrative surrounding that land. Dennis shared that the Shinnecock community is actively working to shift the language used to describe their homeland, referring to it as the “land of our ancestors” rather than the colonial term “reservation”(Dennis, 2022). Yet, these efforts are often hindered by persistent misconceptions about Indigenous Peoples and a lack of meaningful communication with neighboring state authorities. (Albano, 2019). These challenges are intertwined with long-standing stereotypes that depict Native Americans as either primitive or solely connected to nature—ideas reinforced through the recurring “noble savage” archetype in American films (Dennis, 2022).

Such reductive portrayals sustain harmful myths; at the same time, they silence dialogue and further marginalize Indigenous voices. In response, Dennis has turned to art as a form of intercultural dialogue and resistance. Through his project *On This Site*, he photographed over two hundred locations—often in a straightforward, almost mundane style reminiscent of nineteenth-century survey photography—drawing inspiration from Joel Sternfeld (Riverside Art Museum, 2025). By reframing these landscapes through an Indigenous lens, Dennis challenges dominant historical narratives and invites broader audiences to engage with both the legacy of erasure and the urgent, lived realities of contemporary Indigenous life. Another project that exemplifies Dennis’s core message is *Ma’s House*. Through this project, Dennis aims to reshape how the Shinnecock Nation is viewed, moving away from portrayals that reduce the tribe to a singular, stereotypical lens. His message is embodied in a short film that documents the remodeling process of his grandmother’s house, weaving together personal and family history with broader Indigenous cultural narratives. As Dennis explains:

But one thing I really want to change through *Ma’s House* is to actually transform the public perception of Shinnecock, where we’re a modern place, where we have history being celebrated. The reality is on the East End, people who grew up here their whole lives are being pushed out.

The themes of continuity between past and present that are central to the artist's work are also echoed in the reflections of Chenaë Bullock, as captured in an interview for the *Shinnecock Portraits Project*. While Dennis uses photography and place to reclaim historical narratives, Bullock channels that same spirit through activism rooted in shared Indigenous struggles. Her storytelling illustrates how personal experience is deeply entwined with collective memory.

One key moment that exemplifies this sense of unity and inter-Indigenous dialogue was the Standing Rock Sioux protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016 and 2017. This milestone event became a powerful catalyst for many young Indigenous activists, including Bullock. Firsthand experiences of physical violence, inhumane treatment, and the commodification of nature at Standing Rock underscored the urgent need to protect the environment and sacred lands for future generations. The movement sparked a ripple effect, with one act of resistance inspiring many others, fostering a collective call for justice, sovereignty, and environmental protection. Bullock was particularly conscious of the interconnectedness of Indigenous experiences and the land itself, noting,

“The Missouri River flows into the Gulf at certain times of the year, with jet streams carrying the effects up north. We’re all connected by it.”

Beyond protest, Standing Rock became a space of learning and solidarity—a site of ‘transformative communication’ that strengthened intergenerational bonds and intertribal alliances.

For many like Bullock, it wasn't just a protest; it was a turning point in building lasting networks of Indigenous resistance and resurgence.

#### **4.2.3. Shinnecock's Intercultural Dialogue: Action Dimension**

*The Shinnecock Indian Nation Priority Climate Action Plan*, published on April 1, 2024, acknowledges that climate change—particularly sea level rise, shoreline erosion, and saltwater intrusion—continues to pose serious threats to Shinnecock lands. In alignment with long-standing environmental concerns, the plan identifies preserving open space, restoring native vegetation, protecting water and air quality, and promoting sustainable land development as key priorities outlined in the Nation's Land Use Plan.

These present-day efforts build upon the foundation laid in the *2013 Climate Change Adaptation Plan*, which reinforced the community's commitment to resilience. Relocation has not been a viable option for them as they have lived on this land for countless generations, and their cultural identity remains inseparable from it. (Shinnecock Indian Nation, 2013).

The addition of the word "Priority" in the Shinnecock Nation's 2024 Climate Action Plan underscores the inseparable relationship between the Shinnecock way of life and the natural environment. For the Shinnecock, environmental stewardship is not a choice but a continuation of cultural responsibility. This is why the Nation, speaking with a unified voice, emphasizes that preserving and passing on traditional ecological knowledge is essential for both climate adaptation and mitigation.

But the Shinnecock are advancing more than just climate resilience. They are also participating in a broader movement to redefine legal relationships with the natural world. Informed by ancestral teachings and inspired by figures like *Anishinaabe* elder and water walker *Nokomis Josephine Mandamin*, Shinnecock activists have begun advocating not only for Indigenous sovereignty but also for the legal personhood of water. Echoing *Mandamin's* prophetic warning that "an ounce of water will be worth more than an ounce of gold," Shinnecock water protectors have shaped a form of activism that champions the rights of both their people and the water itself. Their guiding principle is simple but powerful: Water is Life.

This vision of viewing water as a living entity resonates with global rights of nature movement and aligns with the principles of Earth Law, an emerging ecocentric legal framework that recognizes ecosystems as living entities with inherent rights to exist, flourish, and regenerate. Under this model, rivers, forests, and oceans can be granted legal personhood, much like corporations, with the ability to be represented in court.

#### 4.2.4. Limitations of Intercultural Dialogue

Tensions surrounding the Shinnecock Indian Nation's efforts to exercise its right to self-determination persists. The accumulated misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples perpetuate harmful stereotypes and reinforce a rigid, static image of Indigenous peoples but also lead to increased opposition when Shinnecock attempts to pursue economic development (Albano, 2019). In contrast to the acceptance of modern economic systems in other communities, initiatives led by Indigenous groups are often met with intense criticism.

For example, in 2019, the State of New York filed a lawsuit against the Shinnecock Nation over a billboard the tribe erected on Sunrise Highway—the gateway to the Hamptons (Binder, 2022). Similarly, a casino project proposed by the Shinnecock in 2021 faced fierce resistance from residents in the Hamptons. With nearly one in five members of the tribe living below the poverty line (Kilgannon, 2021), tribal leaders argue that such projects are vital for generating revenue, alleviating poverty, and funding essential social programs. However, local opposition remains strong. Southampton Town supervisor Jay Schneiderman expressed outrage at the proposals, stating that they would “completely change the character of our community.”

The Shinnecock Nation maintains that, since being federally recognized as a sovereign nation in 2010, they are not required to obtain permits for development on their own land, as they are not subject to New York State jurisdiction. This position was brought to the forefront again in March 2025, when a New York State court ordered the Shinnecock Tribal Nation to halt construction of a travel plaza in Hampton Bays (Roman, 2025). The backlash over the casino, the billboard lawsuit, and the travel plaza dispute all reflect broader tensions. Local officials and the state government often prioritize the environmental aesthetics that appeal to wealthy communities over the economic survival and self-determination of the Shinnecock Nation. These actions reveal a deeper issue of systemic racism embedded within legal and governmental structures—frequently masked as efforts to protect the “environmental character” of the region (Binder, 2022).

Jeremy Dennis's photography project *Nothing Happened Here* captures the complexity of the relationship between mainstream dominant elites and Native Americans in the U.S. The project features stylized portraits of non-Indigenous people impaled by arrows—symbolizing the “white guilt” carried by many Americans and the discomfort of coexisting with communities their ancestors attempted to erase. Dennis's work calls on viewers to confront these harmful narratives and challenge the long-held, stereotypical portrayals of Indigenous peoples (Dennis, 2022). The challenges faced by the Shinnecock Nation reflect deeply rooted imbalances in power dynamics, which complicate the path toward reconciliation and mutual understanding. Our research identifies the transformative power of intercultural dialogue as a key factor in addressing such tensions. The Shinnecock's

approach—emphasizing powerful storytelling and community awareness—underscores the importance of integrating Indigenous knowledge into broader decision-making processes as a matter of course. However, the intercultural dialogue is primarily occurring with indirect counterparts, and there is a notable insufficiency in horizontal dialogue with neighboring states.

### **4.3. Indigenous-based, youth-led movement: Pacific Climate Warriors**

#### **4.3.1. Introduction**

The Pacific Climate Warriors (PCW) is a grassroots organization composed of people from the Pacific Islands and diaspora who are at the frontline of the climate crisis. Their mission is to take action to protect their islands from the devastating impacts of climate change (350 Pacific, 2025).

The 13 Pacific Island Countries – Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu – span an ocean area comparable in size to Africa, while their combined land area is roughly the size of Lithuania, home to approximately 2.6 million people (European Commission, 2025). These nations are home to three major cultural groups – Melanesian, Polynesian, and Micronesian –, whose communities rely heavily on coastal resources for food, clothing, and other essential materials. Their rich cultural heritage includes traditions such as storytelling and passing down community wisdom from generation to generation (Parsons, 2022).

#### **4.3.2. Main Issues in terms of Climate Change**

Despite their rich cultural heritage and deep connection to the land and ocean, these island nations face an escalating crisis. Projections indicate that mean sea levels will rise between 25 and 58 cm by the end of the 21st century (SPREP, 2008). Given that many of these islands are low-lying and only a few meters above sea level, they face increasing risks of flooding, coastal erosion, and storm surges (Parsons, 2022). As outlined by SPREP (2008), the impacts of climate change on these islands will be profound:

- Rising sea levels due to melting ice caps and increasing ocean temperatures.
- More frequent and intense storms, cyclones, floods, droughts, and heatwaves.
- Saltwater intrusion into freshwater sources, reducing access to drinking water and making it harder to grow crops.
- Disruptions to food security, as extreme weather events, shifting rainfall patterns, flooding, saltwater intrusion, and increased coral bleaching, threaten local food production.

- Serious health risks, as higher temperatures, flooding, and water contamination will lead to increased cases of waterborne and vector-borne diseases, such as cholera, typhoid, malaria, and dengue.

The voices of Pacific Islanders highlight the human toll of these changes. As Helen Schwalger, from the island of Upolu in Samoa, shares:

*The story of my land. It is an area that is affected mostly by flooding. My land, of course, means everything to me. It is a safe place where I and my family live and I consider my land, my home. Most have moved to a higher area where they can avoid the flooding because the flooding has affected us. Most have lost their homes. Not only that, the surrounding has been damaged because of flooding. It has been very stressful for most of them. (350 Pacific, 2022).*

Similarly, Aniva Lokeni from Manono, one of Samoa's smallest islands, expresses her concerns:

*My hope for my community is for them to come in together, to work together, hand in hand [--] so that they can stand together and fight against any kind of natural disasters and be resilient with what's currently happening right now. We are currently affected by what other big countries are doing out there. We are losing our lands. We are losing our homes. The sea level rise is actually affecting us. It's eroding off our lands and we're actually sinking. (350 Pacific, 2022).*

#### **4.3.3. The role of intercultural dialogue and engagement within the PCW's advocacy work: narrative dimension**

The Pacific Ocean covers one-third of the Earth's surface, encompassing a diverse range of geological, topographical, ecological, and climatic environments. As a result, the cultural landscape of the Pacific Islands has been shaped by the region's geology and landforms. While the islands share a sense of regional identity due to their historical background and adaptation to the environment, they also exhibit remarkable cultural diversity. For instance, Polynesia and parts of Micronesia are home to Polynesian-speaking populations, whereas Melanesia is recognized as the most linguistically diverse region in the world, where even neighboring valleys may have entirely distinct languages. Beyond language, Pacific Islanders share many commonalities, including social structures, gardening and fishing practices, and historical experiences of colonialism. However, these shared elements also manifest in diverse ways, contributing to the region's rich cultural and social complexity (UNESCO, 2005).

Through the PCW' climate advocacy, two key processes have emerged: (1) an intercultural dialogue among Pacific islanders aimed at forging a Pan-Pacific identity, and (2) an intercultural engagement with international stakeholders, seeking unity around a common cause: the fight against climate change.

The first process is exemplified by one of the PCW' campaigns, in which they used customary flags, traditional dress, and song and dance to express both distinctiveness and unity. In this event, they performed the hit single *We Are the World*, with representatives from each island singing specific lines in their respective national languages. This symbolic act helped dissolve national and cultural boundaries among Pacific islanders. Additionally, they performed a composite *haka* – a traditional war dance of the Maori people (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025) – , where individual national identities merged into a powerful and intimidating display of Pan-Pacific strength and unity. Both the composite song and the composite *haka*, along with the exchange of customary dress and flags, created a space for the Warriors – who maintain strong national identities – to come together as one Pan-Pacific entity.

The second process aligns with what Hannah Fair describes as “world enlargement.” This form of intercultural engagement was evident in another PCW campaign, where they demonstrated that the challenges of climate change extend beyond the islands, spilling over into Australia and other nations. Through this process, the Warriors positioned their activism as a global endeavor, emphasizing that their actions were on behalf of the entire world. Their discourse also challenged dominant approaches to climate change, advocating for the decolonization of climate knowledge. They seized the opportunity to shift the narrative, arguing that Pacific islanders are knowledgeable and capable, and that it is time for Australia and other nations to learn from their traditional knowledge systems to combat climate change (Fair, 2020).

#### **4.3.4. Strategies for dialogue and their worldwide impact: action dimension**

As the main slogan of the PCW, “*We are not drowning, we are fighting!*”, conveys, this organization seeks to shift the dominant narrative that portrays Pacific Islanders solely as victims of climate change. Instead, they emphasize their agency, resilience, and capacity to thrive as communities despite the challenges they face (350 Pacific, 2025).

To reclaim their stories, they employ a range of communication strategies, including recorded testimonies on their website, the 2024 documentary *The Forgotten Pacific*, artistic representations, and more. In her essay *A Sea of Warriors: Performing an Identity of Resilience and Empowerment in the Face of Climate Change in the Pacific*, Candice Steiner analyzes the messages conveyed by Pacific Islanders through three performance initiatives: the 2011 *Water is Rising* concert tour, the

Pacific Warrior Campaign – which included the 2013 *Warrior Day of Action* and the 2014 *Canoe Building Day of Action* – and the multimedia dramatic performance *Moana: The Rising of the Sea*.

Steiner’s analysis highlights how Pacific Islanders have integrated themselves into a global movement that raises awareness about the devastating impacts of climate change in the region. Through these initiatives, they amplify their voices, humanize the climate crisis, and garner support from audiences beyond the Pacific community. Importantly, these efforts are not isolated actions but rather the collective expression of what Steiner calls “an entire sea of warriors.”

As Vilsoni Hereniko, Director of the Oceania Centre for Arts, Culture, and Pacific Studies, argues, while there is extensive scientific data on climate change, its human dimension is often overlooked. Performances – particularly *Moana* – bridge this gap by allowing audiences to grasp the reality of sea level rise not just intellectually, but emotionally (Hereniko, as cited in Steiner, 2015). Through their artistic approach, the PCW have successfully conveyed the lived experience of climate change, forging deep emotional connections with people worldwide.

#### **4.3.5. Findings through Interviews**

Two people involved in the work of the PCW were interviewed for the purpose of this study. The first one, Nunu—who we will refer to this way to preserve anonymity—is a Samoa-born PCW advocate who migrated and now lives in New Zealand. She was chosen for this interview as she represents very well the people who are born in the islands and who now face the reality and narratives of climate change from a Western country.

The second interviewee, Hannah—who will also be referred to in this way to maintain anonymity—was born in New Zealand; however, she identifies as Samoan-Tokelauan, as her grandparents migrated from the islands, and her identity aligns with that of the Indigenous communities from the Pacific Islands. She is not currently active in the PCW’s work, as she had to pause for personal reasons, but she is planning to return in the near future.

This section will show the main narratives found in these two interviews with Nunu and Hannah—representatives of both the people born in the Pacific Islands and those who consider themselves part of the Pacific diaspora—in terms of their relationship with climate change in the Pacific region and their advocacy work on the issue.

#### **Pacific Islander Environmental Wisdom Beyond Western Climate Discourse**

Nunu was born and raised on the island of Samoa, and she mentions that as she grew up, she would hear stories that generations before her had the possibility to walk across the street where there

was so much land. Now, things have changed, and approximately half of the land is already underwater. As she mentioned, *“our backyard is literally the Pacific Ocean”*. This was the reality of her family and her community, and it was not until she migrated to New Zealand that she heard the concept of climate change for the first time. This is why, for her, intercultural dialogue and the practice of storytelling are so important, as she thinks that people living in the islands are the most knowledgeable when it comes to managing climate change adaptation, as the communities have been learning about it for years.

In a similar line, Hannah argues that people within the Pacific Islands had to learn how to look after the resources in the islands, as they were limited, so they have been practicing sustainability even before they had heard the term. She also argues that Pacific Islanders have years of lived experience—even before colonial times—managing the environment sustainably, and that all this knowledge is embedded in their songs, their dances, as well as their fishing practices. Unfortunately, she argues that this knowledge has been brushed away by the most powerful nations that are leading the conversation on climate change, as they have not seen any value in it and have prioritized Western knowledge.

### **Victimization Narratives of Pacific Islanders in New Zealand’s Climate Discourse**

Nunu explained that New Zealand still lives in a colonial legacy, which infiltrates its education systems and its communities. When she was studying high school, she had already migrated to New Zealand, where, for the first time, she heard the concept of climate change. For her, it was impregnated with a white savior narrative, where they were learning about all the vulnerabilities of the Pacific Islands and how they needed “to be saved.”

This phenomenon was also conveyed by Hannah, who explained that when people first hear of the harsh climate realities that Pacific Islanders are facing, the first reaction is wanting to preserve them and save them. This is why, as diaspora communities, they are taught in the PCW movement to position themselves in a way that acknowledges the different lens they have compared to people living in the islands. They must recognize the resources they have had access to as members of the diaspora living in a Western country—resources that people in the islands do not have access to.

As Hannah explained:

*“The first lesson is to not look at our families and our communities who live back home as victims. Because they know. They know what their reality is, and they have known it for a long time. They have their own personal views and stances on climate change, and they know what to do. The issue is that no one wants to listen to them.”*

Therefore, the PCW organization does not seek to save anybody, but rather to support the people in the islands and act as a channel through which their voices can be heard.

### **Barriers to Intercultural Dialogue: Age, Gender, Ethnic Background and Power Dynamics**

When asked about the barriers she encountered while trying to foster intercultural dialogue through her work, Nunu mentioned age and gender as factors that have limited her participation in certain types of conversations within Pacific Islander communities. For example, given her young age, she faces power hierarchies within different island cultures, where authority is often centered in elder communities—so her voice may not be considered as relevant. She also pointed out that the fact that the PCW is mostly composed of women creates a barrier in terms of the types of spaces they can access, especially since patriarchal norms were imposed through the European colonization of the islands. Additionally, some chiefs in Samoan communities, known as *matai*, do not listen to the PCW, as they do not see them as representing the group of people the chiefs are expected to engage with.

On her side, Hannah explained that the biggest struggle the PCW face when trying to engage in intercultural dialogue at a political, international level—and in their advocacy work overall—is the fact that the countries seen as economic powerhouses are not open to listening to indigenous peoples. As she argued, *“we’re still having to justify why we even get a seat in these spaces”*. She explained that instead of focusing on what must be done in terms of climate action, the struggle continues to center on ensuring that indigenous peoples from the Pacific Islands are even able to participate in the conversations around climate change.

### **Emotional and Spiritual Narratives Inspiring Youth Climate Action**

Nunu explained that climate change is a much larger conversation in the Pacific Islands, as communities there are constantly facing climate emergencies and disasters. However, in countries like New Zealand—where Pacific Islander diaspora communities now include up to fourth-generation individuals—there is often a cultural disconnect from the challenges being faced in the islands. Adding to this, Nunu noted that the discourse around climate change has itself been colonized, which has pushed many young diaspora members away from engaging in climate conversations.

To raise awareness among these communities and try to bring them into the climate conversation, the PCW conducts workshops that appeal to the spiritual values of young people. Nunu shared one of the spiritual narratives they use to engage with the diaspora youth:

*“There are responsibilities and part of that responsibility is to be spiritually sound. And to be spiritually sound you need to look after the land [...] the roles that we have on this Earth are also tied to the roles that we have for when we leave this Earth as well. If we don’t look after*

*the land, then we're not honoring God's creation [...] so that kind of spiritual dialogue has played like a big part in advocacy."*

An example of how effective the PCW is in driving youth participation is Hannah, who joined the organization after meeting them at a conference at her university in New Zealand. As she shared: *"If you're from those islands ethnically and you're born outside of it, you're trying to reconnect and to keep hold of your language, keep hold of your culture. But when there's no island to kind of come anchor yourself back to, that to me [...] is such a massive injustice."* She explained that listening to all the stories from people facing the climate crisis in the islands made her want to invest her time and energy in advocacy with the PCW, as the issue suddenly became very personal to her.

*\* For confidentiality purposes, the names of individuals interviewed for the Pacific Climate Warriors case have been anonymized.*

## **5. Analysis**

In the following section, we will seek to put the narrative and the active dimension of each actors' engagement in climate action, in order to tease out: (1) the relationship between narrative and action at play, and the particular type of engagement it produces; (2) the contribution that such specific type of engagement makes, in terms of "inclusivity" and "effectiveness", for advancing sustainable climate policies.

### **Pope Francis**

Though Francis's engagement spans a wide variety of activities and actors, one can find two common main intentions across them: first, to create awareness around what he understands as the source of problem ("technocratic culture"); second, to create and/or facilitate communication bridges across actors of different positionalities of power, culture and relationship with the climate issue.

In the end, both of these intentions are interconnected, and follow the greater goal of inspiring effective climate action through collective global efforts. For Pope Francis, this motivation fits into a greater one of higher order: the wish that humans today can reconnect with the true relationship that they are called to have towards God, others and Creation.

Though it might seem unnecessary to remark that the moral perspective framing Pope Francis's narrative on the climate crisis also permeates his activism. Nonetheless, it is important to do so, since noting this relationship reveals the specific shape that his engagement takes, and consequently his contribution.

That Francis gives a radical importance to open dialogue in his engagement for climate action, derives from: a) his understanding of climate as a social global problem; and b) his understanding of the “technocratic culture” as undermining possibilities for social collaboration by fostering a culture of isolation: “God has united us to all his creatures. Nonetheless, the technocratic paradigm can isolate us from the world that surrounds us and deceive us by making us forget that the entire world is a “contact zone”. (Francis, Lsi, para. 107).

In this way, Pope Francis’s engagement as dialogue is self-understood as a) the only ultimate effective means for tackling the climate problem and b) a direct form of resistance to the technocratic paradigm. One specific contribution of his engagement to foster “sustainable climate action” policies seems to reside, in part, in the exemplary way in which he has leveraged his position as a moral leader with political influence for facilitating spaces for dialogue.

Another key contribution of Pope Francis seems to be the specific way in which he has understood the necessity of radically open and permanent dialogue for constructing the necessary bridges of cross-cultural collaboration that the global nature of the issue of climate change demands. His engagement itself is “ecological” – seeks an holistic dimension.

But the ultimate power of his impact seems to come from the combination of this understanding with the example of his leadership to undercarry it. Pope Francis seems to offer a paradigmatic example of what true efforts for intercultural dialogue look like, since the radicalness of its openness and relentlessness seem to imply inclusivity by construction.

Through his efforts, Pope Francis has opened channels of communication and collaboration within the Catholic Church, between the secular political high-level stakeholders and religious voices; between scientific and moral perspectives. This has positioned him uniquely as a global leader in the climate change movement well beyond the Catholic community, among believers and non-believers alike.

### **Shinnecock Indian Nation**

“Who is Water?” and “Water is Life” are two expressions that embody the Shinnecock Nation’s message. By shifting the question from *what* to *who*, Shinnecock activists humanize water, transforming it from an object into a living relative. This reframing is both subtle and persuasive, sparking curiosity and promoting critical thinking on the subject. Viewing water as a being rather than a resource also creates a direct connection to the peoples who steward it—in this case, Indigenous peoples—placing nature and Indigenous communities on the same side of the story. This message ultimately points toward a shared goal: the legal recognition of both Indigenous Peoples and nature. This is where dialogue and engagement intersect.

According to Amnesty International, Indigenous Peoples have endured a history of forced evictions from ancestral lands they have occupied and governed for thousands of years prior to the arrival of colonizers in the 15th century. In the same context, the Shinnecock Nation’s political and economic choices continue to be denied by neighboring authorities, despite the Shinnecock being a self-governing tribe. These rights fall under the umbrella of self-determination—interpreted in international law as justifying the collective right of peoples to participate in international law-making (Jones, 2021), as well as the freedom to determine their political status and pursue their economic, social, and cultural development. This right is enshrined in key legal instruments such as the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

As the term “peoples” in international human rights law carries significant legal weight when asserting the right to self-determination, many of the tensions between Indigenous Peoples and states stem from differing interpretations of this right (Amnesty International, 2025). Given their history of legal erasure—and the marginalization and exclusion that has resulted—the Shinnecock Nation’s climate activists are aware of the profound importance of being acknowledged as a “peoples” under international law, recognizing it as a foundational prerequisite for the realization of their rights.

Incorporating Indigenous knowledge into climate adaptation strategies—such as disaster preparedness, land-use planning, environmental conservation, and sustainable development—requires the reduction or removal of legal and institutional barriers that have long excluded Native American from decision-making processes. The Shinnecock approach in intercultural dialogue and engagement—advocating for the natural rights of water and the Earth, and collaborating with botanical gardens to incorporate traditional wisdom—demonstrates their commitment to aligning climate action with their inherent rights.

### **Pacific Climate Warriors**

The Pacific Climate Warriors initiative exemplifies a shift in narrative from portraying Indigenous and Pacific communities as passive victims of climate change to recognizing them as empowered agents of resistance, particularly through the lens of youth leadership. Originating from an urgent call by youth activists, the movement has evolved to expand its scope to include the broader Pacific Islander community—reflecting a collective and culturally grounded approach to climate justice. Observations indicate that inter-indigenous and intercultural dialogue played a significant role in this movement, as Pacific Islanders—both in the diaspora and across island nations—were mobilized as a united community to confront the ongoing and imminent threats of climate change, transforming their shared cultural identity into collective political action.

As highlighted in the interviews, the Pacific Climate Warriors have observed that Western climate discourse often overlooks the traditional knowledge held by Indigenous communities — in

this case, Pacific Islanders. These communities have long been experiencing and adapting to climate change, developing empirical knowledge and a deep understanding of how to respond to its impacts. Yet, their voices are frequently marginalized by the dominant, science-based narrative. Through intercultural engagement, the Pacific Climate Warriors not only demonstrate the depth of their knowledge and the importance of integrating it into climate policy, but also challenge the common perception of frontline communities as passive victims. Instead, they teach us to recognize these communities as active agents who can meaningfully contribute to the development of both global and local strategies for climate mitigation and adaptation.

## 6. Policy Recommendations

Pope Francis exemplified the essence of inclusive dialogue in the film *The Letter: A Message for Our Earth*, where he engaged with individuals from diverse backgrounds to address the climate crisis (Brown, 2022). His approach serves as a foundational model for intercultural dialogue, demonstrating how structured, empathetic conversations can bridge divides and foster mutual understanding. Similarly, at the 2024 Summit of the Future, world leaders adopted the Pact for the Future, embracing this ethos by bringing together a broad spectrum of stakeholders—including local authorities, Indigenous Peoples, civil society, the private sector, faith-based organizations, and the scientific and academic communities—in its Action 55 to collaboratively confront global challenges.

Research indicates that such inclusivity is a constructive approach for climate change discussions, facilitating engagement at various levels. In this context, the research recommends adopting the study circle dialogue model, as articulated by Dawn Emerson Addy (2002), which offers a proven methodology for community engagement in climate action.

### Policy Recommendations

1. Institutionalize the Study Circle Dialogue Model: Governments and local authorities should formally adopt the study circle dialogue model as a standard methodology for community engagement in climate action. This approach emphasizes collaborative, non-competitive learning rooted in adult education principles, promoting mutual understanding and collective problem-solving. Encourage intercultural dialogue that values diversity across racial, ethnic, economic, religious, and political identities. Such dialogue fosters inclusive participation and ensures that climate strategies reflect the needs and aspirations of all community segments.
2. Avoid One-Way Communication Formats: Design dialogue sessions that avoid one-way communication formats such as debates or lecturing. Instead, facilitate environments where all participants can share experiences and knowledge, leading to a deeper understanding and collaborative action.

3. **Ensure Voluntary Participation:** Encourage voluntary participation in dialogue sessions, as opposed to compensated focus group discussions. Voluntary involvement fosters a genuine sense of community investment and commitment to the dialogue process.
4. **Design Structured Dialogue Sessions:** Despite their seemingly relaxed atmosphere, dialogue sessions should be designed with specific goals, tasks, and structure, including action components embedded into their format. If any of these elements are flawed in the design stage, the dialogue process may fail to capture the richness gained from the variety of perspectives within the group.
5. **Establish a Consistent and Predictable Process for Reviewing Dialogues:** As part of the implementation assessment, an official review mechanism should be established to confirm the balanced participation of all stakeholders. This should include details such as who participated, the outcomes of the dialogues, and the cultural and geographical representation considered. The assessment should be based on cumulative data collected on an annual or biannual basis.

## 7. Conclusions

- Traditional environmental knowledge offers valuable perspectives often overlooked in Western scientific climate discourse.
- Emotional and spiritual narratives play a key role in motivating youth to engage in climate action.
- Radical openness is essential in dialogues involving complex and conflicting interests, pushing conversation beyond its usual limitations.
- Constructive intercultural dialogue can only occur when all stakeholders—the poor, the youth, Indigenous communities, and the scientific community—come together to care for our common home.
- Ethical leadership constitutes a crucial element in balancing out the lack of inclusivity and power asymmetries that dominate in the high-level climate action conversation. It can provide a platform to better position underrepresented voices into the decision-making process.

This research paper explores how intercultural and interreligious dialogue (ICD/IRD) can contribute meaningfully to sustainable climate action by challenging dominant paradigms and centering alternative ways of knowledge. Rather than positioning sustainability as a purely technical (or scientific) issue, the research highlights the cultural, moral, and relational dimensions of climate engagement. It emphasises the importance of narrative, lived experience, and community-based action in driving more inclusive and grounded responses to the climate crisis.

This report uses a narrative-analysis approach to examine three case studies that represent diverse expressions of ICD/IRD in practice: Pope Francis’s ethical leadership, the Shinnecock Indian Nation’s environmental advocacy, and the Pacific Climate Warriors’ youth-led activism. Each of these cases illustrates how different communities, through distinct epistemologies and worldviews, have contributed to reframing climate discourse in ways that foreground responsibility, solidarity, and justice.

Pope Francis’s approach to climate action is grounded in moral leadership and shaped by his theological understanding of the human–nature relationship. Through the idea of *integral ecology*, he highlights the deep connections between environmental degradation, social inequality, and spiritual values. Rather than treating the climate crisis as a technical challenge alone, he calls for a broader shift: one that includes ethical awareness, care for the most vulnerable communities, and shared responsibility. Through institutions like the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and platforms like the *Laudato Si’*, he gives an example of how faith-based leadership can open spaces for dialogue and collaboration that go beyond conventional climate governance.

The Shinnecock Indian Nation, on the other hand, draws attention to the enduring relationship between Indigenous knowledge, environmental stewardship, and cultural sovereignty. By advocating for the legal personhood of water and reviving traditional language and governance systems, the Shinnecock case challenges extractive legal and political structures. Their activism reveals how ecological justice is fundamentally tied to historical memory, land rights, and the recognition of Indigenous knowledge. It also emphasises the role of narratives in reshaping governance models that respect the interdependence of human and non-human life.

The Pacific Climate Warriors (PCW) case study offers an example of climate activism focussed on Indigenous identity, youth leadership, and shared regional experiences. Through the traditional concepts (for eg. *manava*), they articulate a worldview that understands climate change not only as a policy issue but as an existential threat to their ways of life. Their movement relies on storytelling, cultural performance, and transnational mobilization to assert their presence in climate spaces and to build alliances across diverse Pacific Islander communities. PCW’s work exemplifies how intercultural dialogue and shared cultural memory can lead to powerful forms of collective agency.

Across the three case studies, the research identifies recurring challenges to the effective implementation of ICD/IRD, including tokenistic inclusion, the universalization of liberal-secular norms, and structural imbalances in dialogue settings. It emphasizes the need for epistemic humility, methodological reflexivity, and structurally embedded dialogue mechanisms that avoid symbolic engagement and instead foster mutual recognition and co-creation.

By focusing on narratives, values, and the affective dimensions of climate action, this study positions dialogue not as a supplementary tool but as a central practice in imagining sustainable futures. It argues that transformative climate engagement requires more than data or policy, it must also make space for meaning, belonging, and ethical commitment. The research offers insights into how diverse communities are already doing this work, and what can be learned from their practices for broader climate governance. Effective climate action must be as much about co-creating meaning and belonging as it is about reducing emissions.

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The AI tool Chat GPT was used for the exclusive purpose of grammar checking and proofreading.

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