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Ethical Leadership on Intercultural Dialogue for Sustainable Climate Action

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Keywords

Ethical leadership, intercultural dialogue, sustainable climate action, social justice

Abstract

Climate change is a profound global social challenge that both exposes and exacerbates inequalities, disproportionately affecting populations that have contributed least to the problem. In current discourses, where technical solutions are often emphasized, the ethical and intercultural dimensions necessary for inclusive global collaboration are frequently overlooked. This research contends that the first step is to frame climate change as a moral crisis rather than solely as an environmental or technical issue, advocating for epistemological holism that goes beyond perspectives grounded merely in economic and technical terms**.** It aims to provide actionable insights into the role intercultural dialogue can play in advancing global climate policies, positioning such dialogue as essential for integrating diverse moral perspectives, spiritual insights, and cultural narratives—elements critical for fostering inclusive and just climate solutions. Despite recognition in both literature and public discourse, concrete analyses of cases in which intercultural dialogue successfully advances inclusivity in climate change conversations at the global level remain limited. This study examines the Shinnecock Indian Nation, the Pacific Climate Warriors, and Pope Francis's leadership to highlight gaps in global climate collaboration—specifically in representation, epistemological diversity, and fraternity and social friendship. By analyzing these three case studies, the research identifies key agendas for integration into climate discussions and demonstrates how Pope Francis's radically open approach has created new avenues for inclusive dialogue and collaboration, offering a reference point for future intercultural engagement in international climate governance and diplomacy.

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1. Introduction

Humanity is currently facing unprecedented challenges as a result of anthropogenic climate change.[1] Rising global temperatures, melting ice caps, sea level rise, the submergence of territories, and the increasing frequency of floods, droughts, and heatwaves are just some of the impacts threatening human livelihoods across the globe. In light of these complex and interconnected crises, the urgency for collective, inclusive, and ethically grounded responses—across cultures, nations, and belief systems—has never been more pressing.

This research is premised on the understanding that environmental sustainability requires a holistic approach—one that conceives dialogue not merely as a form of communication, but as a transformative process that fosters empathy, shared responsibility, and collective action in the face of ecological collapse. Building on this premise, the study seeks to investigate what role intercultural dialogue can play in effectively advancing global climate policies to be sustainable for addressing climate change.

While international agreements like the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide structural frameworks for climate governance, these fall short in addressing the cultural, spiritual, and relational dimensions of the issue of sustainability. These gaps highlight the growing need for approaches that transcend purely technical or policy-driven solutions. Climate change, by its very nature, constitutes a complex, systemic phenomenon shaped by intertwined social, economic, and environmental processes. Consequently, it can no longer be understood solely as an environmental or technical concern but must be approached as a multidimensional challenge requiring integrative and context-sensitive responses.

Moreover, climate change exposes and amplifies the structural social inequalities of the global order. As Sengupta (2023, 3) notes, "the most

[1] Throughout this article, it is to the problems derived from human-generated global warming that we're referring to whenever we use the word climate change.

significant consequence of climate change lies in the widening of global inequality, and in its devastating impact on the lives and livelihoods of those least responsible for causing the problem.*"* This asymmetry between responsibility and vulnerability is not incidental; it is historically produced and structurally maintained through colonial legacies, extractive economic systems, and political indifference. Thus, the climate crisis reflects as well as constitutes a moral crisis for humanity.

In this sense, technical solutions alone are insufficient in addressing the root of this deep ethical challenge. If climate action continues to operate within the current international framework where power dynamics are ignored and justice claims go unacknowledged, it risks reproducing the very injustices it aims to remedy. What is needed is a transformative shift in how we communicate about and respond to climate change, one that recognizes the moral, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of the crisis. Such a shift must integrate diverse worldviews, ethical systems, and lived experiences into climate action. In this context, intercultural dialogue emerges as a powerful yet underutilized tool for promoting sustainable lifestyles and fostering environmental justice.

This article proposes *intercultural dialogue and engagement* as an essential framework for advancing such a shift. Often dismissed as "soft" forms of communication, intercultural dialogue is in fact a powerful strategy for ethical engagement. It provides spaces where diverse moral perspectives, cultural narratives and spiritual insights – particularly those of historically marginalized communities – can come together to develop more inclusive, just and relational climate solutions.

Intercultural dialogue does not merely supplement scientific or policy-driven approaches; it challenges the dominant modes of climate governance by reintroducing justice and ethical responsibility into the conversation. By creating dialogical spaces that center the voices of indigenous peoples, small island communities, women, and youth, intercultural dialogue and engagement can foreground perspectives that are otherwise ignored or instrumentalized in mainstream negotiations. As Sengupta (2023, 5) notes, *"*A failure to adequately recognize justice-based claims continues to haunt

both the architecture and processes of international climate diplomacy." Intercultural dialogue and engagement offers a pathway to rectify this failure by embedding ethical responsibility, cultural recognition, and narrative plurality into international climate diplomacy.

Rooted in a vision of solidarity and planetary responsibility, this dialogical approach reframes climate action not just as a matter of policy, but as a matter of justice. It affirms that addressing climate change requires more than technical fixes. It requires engaging with diverse ways of knowing, feeling, and relating to each other and to the Earth. When practiced inclusively and ethically, intercultural dialogue is not merely an act of listening. It becomes a form of resistance, healing, and co-creation, one that can meaningfully transform the foundations of climate governance and renew our collective commitment to a just and liveable future.

In the sections that follow, we examine the three case studies that embody the transformative potential of dialogue in climate contexts: Pope Francis' environmental leadership through Laudato Si', the Shinnecock Indian Nation's grassroots land defence, and the Pacific Climate Warriors' youth-led activism. These case studies were selected to reflect the different ways in which intercultural dialogue has been utilized across different geographies, belief systems, and political arenas. Through these cases, we seek to explore how intercultural dialogue can fill critical gaps in climate governance, particularly around representativity, epistemological diversity, and global solidarity, and offer concrete pathways toward more ethical and inclusive climate action.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The focus of our analysis is the current multilateral system for addressing climate change as hosted by the United Nations' network, since it has been the matrix for global collaboration on climate action: thus, our scope is the room that such a system has made so far for intercultural engagement on the issue of climate action. This is not to say that engagement should be confined within this framework; rather, it invites consideration of how we could move beyond the system to foster transformative change.

Definitions: climate change, climate crisis and climate action

This research seeks to provide actionable insights on what role intercultural dialogue can play in effectively advancing global climate policies to be sustainable for addressing anthropogenic climate change[2] in the context of what the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change has deemed the "triple planetary crisis".[3] By anthropogenic climate change we mean "a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods".[4] By climate crisis we mean the destructive effects it has on the health and prospects of both humans and life and earth ecosystems across the planet. By 'climate action' we refer to the objective of SDG13, which calls for "urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts".[5]

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[2] Cf. "Anthropogenic emissions". IPCC, 2018. Annex I: Glossary Matthews, J.B.R. (ed.), p. 542. In: Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, H.-O. Pörtner, et al. (eds.). *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 541-562, doi:10.1017/9781009157940.008.

[3] That means the crises of biodiversity loss and of pollution alongside and deeply interconnected with that of anthropogenic climate change. Cf. "What is the triple planetary crisis?". UNFCCC website. Last consulted, October 25th, 2025. Retrieved: https://unfccc.int/news/what-is-the-triple-planetary-crisis.

[4] Cf. "Climate Change". In IPCC, 2022: Annex II: Glossary [Möller, V., et al. (eds.)]. In: *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* [H.-O. Pörtner et al. (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA, pp. 2897–2930, doi:10.1017/9781009325844.029. https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/chapter/annex-ii/.

[5] "13. Climate Action". SDG website. Last consulted, October 25th, 2025. Retrieved: https://globalgoals.org/goals/13-climate-action/.

Also, we would like to point out at the outset of the article one unique friction that addressing climate challenge poses, both in theory and in practice, due to its epistemological complexity for human psychology. One can think of climate change as a 'hyperobject'[6]. What distinguishes hyperobjects from regular objects of knowledge is that their properties somehow exceed humans' capacity to perceive them as a whole, as well as their capacity to imagine them. Thus, they resist being exhausted by human reason.[7] Thinking of a speck of plutonium would be an object, whereas imagining the range of time it takes for plutonium to decay before it's safe for humans (24,100) is a hyperobject.[8]

The fact that climate change is a 'hyperobject' can account for significant psychological barriers for addressing climate change in an adequate and timely manner; namely, barriers such as the so-called shifting-baselines syndrome,[9] at the level of perception; and climate anxiety, at the level of action.

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[6] See Timothy Norton, "Introducing the idea of 'hyperobjects': A new way of understanding climate change and other phenomena". https://www.hcn.org/issues/47-1/introducing-the-idea-of-hyperobjects/.

[7] More specifically, what makes hyperobjects so are the following properties: they are (1) viscous "whatever I do, wherever I am, it sorts of "sticks to me"; (2) nonlocal – "its effects are globally distributed through a huge tract of time." (3) phased – "I only experience pieces of it at any one time" (4) inter-objective – "it consists of all kinds of other entities, but it isn't reducible to them." cf. Idem.

[8] Cf. idem. "Not just this one speck of plutonium, but all the plutonium we've made, ever. That plutonium decays for 24,100 years before it's totally safe. That's an unimaginable time."

[9] Concept coined by Daniel Pauly, in "Anecdotes and the shifting baseline syndrome of fisheries", *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 10 (1995) (10:430). https://www.waterbucket.ca/rm/files/2014/08/AnecdotesShiftingBaselineSyndromeFisheries-_1995.pdf. One straightforward way of defining it is the following: "a gradual change in the accepted norms for the condition of the natural environment due to a lack of experience, memory and/or knowledge of its past condition". Cf. Margaux Pierrel,

At the same time, however, framing climate change as a 'hyperobject' can bring one closer to grasping it and, consequently, closer to overcoming these barriers. It is with this framework in mind that we move forward in this research.

Our use of the term 'sustainable'

Our understanding of the term sustainability is twofold. On the one hand, the term sustainability can be broadly understood as a baseline language tool that catalyzes discussions on addressing growing social, ecological, and economic pressures (Frank, 2016, p. 310). In this sense, sustainability is conceptualized as "the emergent property of a conversation about what kind of world we collectively want to live in now and in the future" (Robinson, 2004, p. 382). For the purposes of this study, we understand 'sustainability' as a metadiscursive property around which conversations on the climate crises gather.

On the other hand, when we speak of the prospect of sustainable global climate policies, we refer to our understanding of the content of the concept. Here, 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.

The context: the history of international climate diplomacy

Concern for the environment is not a modern phenomenon but rather an enduring aspect of human civilization, deeply embedded within major religious and philosophical traditions. However, until the 1972 United

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"Shifting Baseline Syndrome Impacts on Nature Conservation and Prevention". Alfred Toepfer Natural Heritage Scholarship Report 2022, p.2. https://www.europarc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/EUROPARC-Report_MPierrel.pdf

Nations Conference on the Human Environment—the first intergovernmental conference dedicated exclusively to environmental issues—environmental protection remained largely conceptualized within the framework of national sovereignty over natural resources.

During the preparatory stages of the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, developing countries voiced apprehension that international environmental initiatives might impede their economic growth. This concern prompted the formulation of the Founex Report (1971), produced by a group of experts in Founex, Switzerland. The report advanced the view that environmental protection and economic development are not mutually exclusive but interdependent processes, thereby laying the conceptual groundwork for the subsequent emergence of the notion of "sustainable development", which gained formal recognition two decades later at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro.

The principle of sustainable development was further articulated by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED)—commonly known as the Brundtland Commission—established by the United Nations General Assembly in preparation for the Rio Conference. From a historical perspective, the term "sustainable development" represents a compromise between economic and social development on one hand and environmental protection on the other.

The UNCED (1992) marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of international environmental law and governance, institutionalizing the role of science as a central actor by designating the scientific community as one of nine recognized "major groups." The three landmark conventions adopted at Rio—the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD)—were all profoundly influenced by scientific inquiry and underscored the necessity of sustained scientific collaboration.

Since then, climate discourse has predominantly evolved within a socioeconomic and scientific paradigm, emphasizing the interlinkages

between development and empirical knowledge. Yet this prevailing focus has often marginalized alternative epistemologies, including religious, ethical, and traditional ecological knowledge systems, which have historically informed human–nature relations but remain peripheral to mainstream environmental governance and scholarship.

This research approaches climate change through the lens of social justice, understood here as a multi-dimensional concept that encompasses human and non-human interests. While social justice is often interpreted narrowly as addressing socioeconomic inequalities, this study adopts a broader perspective in which ecological justice—recognizing that non-human beings have entitlements—is fully integrated.

The study draws on Carmen G. Gonzalez's four-part conceptualization of environmental justice (2013) to frame human-centered justice concerns in the context of climate change.[10] In Gonzalez's original framework, social justice specifically addresses issues arising from socioeconomic structures and inequalities. In this research, however, the term social justice is employed more broadly as an umbrella concept, encompassing distributive, procedural, corrective, and ecological justice, thereby reflecting the interconnectedness of these dimensions for the purposes of this article. Thus, our use of social justice extends beyond Gonzalez's narrower socioeconomic focus.

The need for intercultural dialogue

The relevance of intercultural dialogue (ICD) has become increasingly salient amid growing tensions over how to address climate change. Far from being a purely communicative exercise, ICD constitutes a normative and political process for reimagining coexistence across cultural, epistemic, and institutional boundaries. Climate change governance inherently involves diverse value systems, knowledge traditions, and histories of inequality; ICD

[10] These are, namely, distributive justice, procedural justice, corrective justice, and social justice.

provides a mechanism to mediate these differences and construct shared frameworks for cooperation.

Empirical evidence highlights the consequences of its absence. The UNESCO and Institute for Economics and Peace *We Need to Talk* report (2022)[11] finds that nearly 89% of active conflicts occur in countries with low levels of intercultural dialogue infrastructure, underscoring how exclusion and miscommunication reinforce colonial hierarchies, cultural erasure, and systemic marginalization. These deficits impede both domestic and transnational cooperation. In climate diplomacy, for instance, the lack of intercultural competencies can hinder collaboration between Indigenous communities, civil society, and state actors. Educational systems that neglect intercultural learning exacerbate polarization, whereas investment in such learning fosters empathy, social cohesion, and democratic resilience[12]. As Kamali-Chirani emphasizes, ICD must be structurally embedded in institutions, education, and policy rather than treated as a form of "soft diplomacy.[13]"

ICD also functions as a participatory space in climate governance and environmental justice, enabling marginalized communities to articulate experiences, negotiate meanings, and claim recognition. It supports both horizontal (community-to-community) and vertical (community-to-institution) communication, informing more equitable and contextually responsive policy design[14]. Crucially, ICD enables the deconstruction of

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[11] UNESCO and Institute for Economics and Peace, *We Need to Talk: Measuring Intercultural Dialogue for Peace and Inclusion* (2022), https://doi.org/10.54678/JKFI1098

[12] UNESCO, *Intercultural Competences: Conceptual and Operational Framework* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2013), https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000219768

[13] F. Kamali-Chirani, "Intercultural Dialogue for Sustainable Development," *Journal of Development Policy and Research* 3, no. 1 (2019), https://doi.org/10.59926/jodprp.vol03/05

[14] F. Kamali-Chirani, "Intercultural Dialogue for Sustainable Development."

dominant environmental discourses that reproduce structural inequality by centering non-dominant worldviews and epistemologies, particularly those grounded in Indigenous and non-Western knowledge systems.

By fostering trust, reciprocal learning, and epistemic pluralism, ICD is indispensable for climate action: it transforms environmental governance from a top-down, technocratic process into an inclusive, participatory, and ethically grounded endeavor, enhancing both the legitimacy and effectiveness of collective climate responses.

Methodology

The article is grounded in applied research and employs case studies that are presented through a narrative storytelling approach. This method highlights a diverse range of voices and stakeholders—those who are entitled to full participation in climate discussions yet remain insufficiently integrated. The article is directed toward decision-making bodies on climate change, not in reference to any specific existing institution, but rather as an invitation to all potential stakeholders who should have a voice in shaping climate policy. The selected case studies exemplify the complex and intersecting attributes that characterize real-world climate governance challenges.

The article is grounded in applied research and employs case studies that are presented through a narrative storytelling approach. This method works through putting a diverse range of voices and stakeholders in relation to each other, so that the distinctiveness of their perspectives can emerge. The case studies focus on those who are entitled to full participation in climate discussions yet remain insufficiently integrated. The article is directed toward decision-making bodies on climate change, not in reference to any specific existing institution, but rather as an invitation to all potential stakeholders who should have a voice in shaping climate policy. The selected case studies exemplify the complex and intersecting attributes that characterize real-world climate governance challenges.

Case study selection

The Pacific Climate Warriors, the Shinnecock Indian Nations and Pope Francis's engagement 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	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 possible directional dynamics of intercultural dialogue, such as top-down, grassroots, or horizontal forms?	✓ Top-down	✓ Grassroot	✓ Top-down grassroot
4. Does the case address the complexities and tensions of intercultural dialogue and engagement, such as conflicting interest, divergent worldviews, or differing cultural values?	✓	✓	✓
5. Does the case engage with intersectional identities such as race, gender, class, and indigeneity, and acknowledge how these shape the community's experience of climate change?	-	✓	✓

6. 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?	✓	✓	✓
7. Does the case represent a specific geographic and/or cultural context that contributes to regional diversity across the selected case studies?	✓	✓	✓

3.Case Studies

The Pacific Climate Warriors: Gap in Representative

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). 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 detailed in the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) *State of the Climate in the South-West Pacific 2023* report, sea-level rise in the Pacific region is occurring at a rate above the global average. Sea surface temperatures have increased three times faster than the global average since 1980, while marine heatwaves have approximately doubled in frequency, intensity, and duration. Although the Pacific Islands are responsible for only 0.02% of global emissions, they are among the most vulnerable to its impacts. The average elevation of these islands is between one and two meters above sea level, with 90% of the population living within five kilometers of the coast and half of the infrastructure located within 500 meters of the sea. As United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres warned, "A worldwide catastrophe is putting this Pacific paradise in peril [...] global average sea

levels are rising at an unprecedented rate. The ocean is overflowing" (World Meteorological Organization, 2024).

In the following section, we explore the narratives shared by Aniva, Hannah, and Nunu—three women who are active members of the Pacific Climate Warriors—as well as the perspective of Mr. Sikulu, another PCW member interviewed by ABC News Australia. The aim is to understand their views on the current climate challenges and threats facing the Pacific Islands, as well as the power dynamics that emerge within climate discourse and negotiations. Hannah and Nunu were interviewed specifically for this research, while Aniva's testimony was drawn from an online video uploaded by the PCW in which she shares her story. The names "Hannah" and "Nunu" are pseudonyms used to protect the identities of the two women interviewed; their real names are not disclosed.

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

> "*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).

Nunu reflected on how New Zealand continues to live under a colonial legacy, which permeates its education system and communities. When she migrated to New Zealand during high school, she encountered the concept of climate change for the first time. To her, it carried a white savior narrative, where the focus was on the vulnerabilities of the Pacific Islands and how they supposedly needed "to be saved." She noted that climate change discourse itself has been colonized, discouraging many young members of the Pacific diaspora from engaging in climate conversations.

As Mr. Sikulu, a member of the PCW, explained to ABC News, he has spent a decade finding ways for Pacific people to have their voices heard in COP talks. He argues that these conferences are the only available mechanism for

them to advocate for the resources and actions needed to ensure their survival (Marchant & Fennell, 2025).

Similarly, as Hannah noted in her interview, the knowledge of Pacific peoples has often been dismissed by the powerful nations leading global climate conversations, which have prioritized Western perspectives instead. She emphasized that Pacific Islanders possess generations of lived experience—dating back to pre-colonial times—in managing the environment sustainably. This knowledge is deeply embedded in their songs, dances, and fishing practices. Unfortunately, it has been largely overlooked within climate negotiations.

Regarding whether ICD contributes to addressing these gaps, Hannah further explained that the greatest challenge the PCW faces in intercultural dialogue—both at the political and international levels, and in their broader advocacy work—is that economic powerhouses remain unwilling to listen to Indigenous voices. As she stated, "We're still having to justify why we even get a seat in these spaces." Instead of focusing on urgent climate action, Pacific Islanders must first struggle to secure participation in the very conversations that shape global climate policy.

Empowering Communities: Agency, Resilience, and Pathways to Thrive

Reflecting on what their perspective contributes, Hannah described how, when outsiders first learn about the harsh climate realities facing Pacific Islanders, their instinct is often to "save" them. This, she explained, is why diaspora communities within the PCW are encouraged to position themselves differently: to recognize the privileges and resources they have in Western contexts—resources that their families in the islands do not—and to avoid framing island communities as helpless victims.

As for where the central issue lies, Hannah put it this way:

> *"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.*

This is powerfully represented in the PCW slogan: *"We are not drowning, we are fighting!"* The organization seeks to challenge dominant narratives that depict Pacific Islanders solely as victims of climate change. Instead, they emphasize agency, resilience, and the capacity of their communities to thrive despite the immense challenges they face (350 Pacific, 2025).

The Shinnecock Nation: Gap in Epistemological Diversity

Shift in Thinking: Restoring Our Relationship with Nature through an Indigenous Perspective

The Shinnecock Indian Nation, one of the oldest self-governing tribes in the United States, is located in Suffolk County, New York, on the Shinnecock Reservation. With a history spanning over 10,000 years, the Nation's story is deeply intertwined with the colonial history of the United States, during which the Shinnecock people endured land dispossession, population loss, poverty, marginalization, and other existential threats (Hirsch, 2021), as well as continuing conflicts of interest, especially around power dynamics in present-day Southampton Town.

The Shinnecock's engagement in climate action and their efforts to transform the way humans relate to nature offer a model of resilience grounded in Indigenous knowledge. The question, "Who is water?"—posed by water scientist and enrolled member of the Shinnecock Nation, Kelsey Leonard—exemplifies the Nation's long-held understanding of land and water not as property to be owned or subjugated by humans, but as living relatives to be cared for and protected. This question demonstrates how storytelling can function as a methodology for communicating relational understandings of the environment and is particularly provocative because it challenges conventional frameworks for interpreting nature.

In the same line of thought, the Shinnecock activists have begun advocating for both the legal personhood of water and its Indigenous sovereignty, which may be understood as two interrelated dimensions within the broader

dynamics of nature and stewardship, drawing inspiration from ancestral teachings and figures such as Anishinaabe elder and water walker Nokomis Josephine Mandamin. Echoing Mandamin's prophetic warning that "an ounce of water will be worth more than an ounce of gold", Shinnecock water protectors have developed a form of activism that champions the rights of both their people and the water itself. Their efforts align with Earth Law, an emerging ecocentric legal framework recognizing ecosystems as living entities with inherent rights to exist, flourish, and regenerate—a principle that can be summed up in the simple yet powerful statement: *Water is Life.* This principle invites critical reflection on why water has not been granted a form of personhood comparable to that recognized for corporations, a status largely accepted and acknowledged by common legal norms.

Starting from the proposition that Water is Life, the Shinnecock Nation explicitly advocates for an ecocentric legal framework while implicitly challenging conventional boundaries of thought. As noted by a Shinnecock activist interviewed in the Shinnecock Portrait Project by Jeremy Dennis, "many of the first laws in the old colonial settlements interrupted [the tribe's] biocentric lifestyles," and "when colonial legal systems displaced Indigenous legal orders, they not only marginalized Indigenous people but also degraded the ecosystems that were sustained by Indigenous law." This perspective opens an avenue for embracing epistemologically diverse worldviews and calls for legal innovations that fully integrate the tribe's long-practiced Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). The 2017 recognition of New Zealand's Whanganui River as a legal person, with rights and guardianship vested in the local Māori iwi, exemplifies the legitimacy of such Indigenous relational frameworks and their potential to inform contemporary environmental law. In this context, for the Shinnecock, granting legal personhood to rivers, forests, and oceans—much like corporations—represents a critical locus of struggle, as it enables nature to be represented and defended within legal systems alongside Indigenous rights.

The Right of Indigenous Peoples to Self-Determination

Some may question why Indigenous rights should occupy a central place in contemporary climate discourse. The experiences of the Shinnecock Nation

provide a compelling response, particularly through two interrelated dimensions: the disjunction between cultural values and material conditions, exemplified by constrained access to clean and safe water, and ongoing challenges to self-determination

Regarding the first, paradoxically, despite the Shinnecock's profound cultural reverence for water and their worldview that situates humans as integral to nature, their actual access to clean and safe water has been severely limited. Kelsey Leonard noted, "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," illustrating that bottled water is not a matter of choice but a necessity, reflecting longstanding infrastructure neglect. This contradiction exposes the disjuncture between Indigenous epistemologies, which ascribe intrinsic value to the natural world, and the material conditions shaped by systemic neglect. Despite living in close proximity to the waters that sustain their identity and lifeways, the Shinnecock experience environmental injustice, demonstrating that symbolic and spiritual connections to nature do not automatically ensure equitable access to its resources.

The second concern arises from pervasive stereotypes portraying Indigenous peoples in a romanticized manner as "noble savages," which often lead neighboring communities and policymakers to contest the Shinnecock's legitimate needs for infrastructure development and their broader right to self-determination. These portrayals, which depict Native Americans as either primitive or solely connected to nature, reinforce harmful myths and further marginalize Indigenous voices (Dennis, 2022). Consequently, discriminatory attitudes persist, and initiatives led by Indigenous communities—particularly those involving engagement with modern economic systems—are frequently met with intense criticism.

In response, Jeremy Dennis has turned to art as a form of intercultural dialogue and resistance. In his project *On This Site*, he photographed over two hundred locations in a straightforward, almost mundane style reminiscent of nineteenth-century survey photography, drawing inspiration from Joel Sternfeld's work of the same name, which examines place as a witness to American violence (Riverside Art Museum, 2025). By reframing these

landscapes through an Indigenous perspective, Dennis challenges dominant historical narratives and invites audiences to confront both the legacy of erasure and the lived realities of contemporary Indigenous life.

In conclusion, the Shinnecock case illustrates that achieving environmental justice and meaningful climate action is inseparable from the recognition and empowerment of Indigenous rights and knowledge. Ensuring Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination is essential not only for protecting traditional lifeways but also for enabling Indigenous communities to participate fully in economic and environmental initiatives. Without such recognition, persistent misrepresentations and stereotypes continue to constrain Indigenous agency, marginalize their epistemologies, and limit the transformative potential of their contributions to contemporary environmental governance.

Pope Francis Ethical Leadership: Filling the Gaps through Fraternity and Social Friendship

Ever since the publication of his encyclical *Laudato si,* along with the speech he gave in the UN New York Headquarters in the 70th session of the General Assembly in 2015, Pope Francis gained a widespread reputation as one of the most active global leaders in the fight to address the climate crisis.

While it is his relentlessness in speaking up on the subject from a moral standpoint which initially attracted this public attention, an equally meaningful part of his climate advocacy were his efforts to facilitate communication bridges across actors of different positionalities of power, culture and relationship with the climate issue. As a result of this endeavor, Pope Francis managed to open several channels of communication and collaboration within the Catholic Church, between the secular political stakeholders and religious voices; between purely techno-scientific and moral perspectives; between stakeholders with high decision-making power and those who have been marginalized in the conversation.

Arguably, it is this which uniquely positioned him as a moral leader in the global conversation on the climate issue, by earning him a social leverage that

extended well beyond the Catholic community and the private sphere of religion. It is this aspect of his engagement which we seek to investigate.[15]

Pope Francis's moral understanding of the climate crisis

In order to be able to understand and analyze the particular way in which Francis tried to leverage intercultural engagement for climate action, a brief sketch needs to be drawn first of the narrative through which Pope Francis addressed the problem of the climate crisis.

The Holy See's main concern on environmental issues has been the integral development of the human person,[16] in accordance 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*).[17]

In this, Pope Francis follows the lines of his predecessors. 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).

According to Francis, the ultimate cause of the climate crisis with which humanity is confronted lies in the anthropological conception that underlies

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[15] A note on Pope Francis's political positionality: 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. However, it is partly the way in which he has leveraged his position as a moral leader with political influence that allowed him to facilitate spaces for dialogue at the different levels.

[16] "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.).

[17] Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1993.

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, so is the solution. Since at the root of the problem is the understanding of the human relationship to nature from the "technocratic paradigm" as detached as opposed to interconnected, "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).

Thus, today's social and environmental problems can only be solved through an "ecological conversion" at the level of the individual, whereby she can reconnect with the true relationship that she is called to have towards God, others, Creation and herself. From this 'ecological' understanding of the human being derives a universally shared responsibility towards the protection of "our common home". This responsibility is twofold: towards our fellow humans as well as towards the rest of Creation. Indeed, for Pope Francis, the moral responsibility to care for the environment is inseparable from that of acting towards remedying structural social injustice (Lsi, para. 49).

Pope Francis's Religious Engagement in Climate Advocacy

Pope Francis has translated his specific understanding and concern of the climate and ecological crises into action by participating or leading a plethora of initiatives. As mentioned before, this includes engagement within the Catholic Church, but is not limited to it. One can think of Pope Francis as having three key channels of influence from which he engages in efforts for facilitating spaces for dialogue and building networks: first, in his direct engagement with others as a religious leader; second, through the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development at the Holy See; and third, through his collaboration with the Laudato si Movement (a grassroots initiative by lay members of the Catholic community).

In his engagement as a religious leader, we will highlight two avenues: a) his engagement with the UN system and b) his engagement with the world at large (when he addresses himself to "all the people of good will").[18] Historically, the Holy See holds close ties with the UN system. The Holy See holds the status of Permanent Observer to the United Nations since 1964, and Popes have been frequently invited to speak to the General Assembly since 1965. But its link with the UN goes back further and deeper, since the perspective of the Holy See was invited during the first years of the UN's existence, as it sought to establish its values and mandates. Notably, Popes have been consistently invited to speak in the context of multilateral discussions around 'sustainable development' ever since they first came up.[19] The Holy See has consistently 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.[20]

[18] Cf. Laudato si, p.1.

[19] Cf. Lai and Tortajada, 2021. The first time a Pope was invited to speak to a UN Mandate was in 1951, where Pope Leo VI gave a speech at the FAO headquarters in Rome.

[20] Cf. idem.

Pope Francis continued this tradition, but he innovated in a couple of ways. On the one hand, he expressed his concern for the environment not merely within the context of sustainable development but as a concern that deserves separate attention in the context of the climate change crisis. Thus, he stepped into the multilateral secular and political conversations in climate change negotiations to contribute a moral perspective.[21] Here, he not only pointed to the big role the nation-state representatives and decision-makers he was addressing had in getting to address the structural causes of the problem, and the moral responsibility they had in doing so. He used his position to try to bring to the conversation the needs of the communities most affected by the damaging consequences of climate change, whose standpoints and concerns tend to be overlooked. Given that they are underrepresented, even though they are the ones suffering the most and contributing the least.

This speaking up for the needs of the most vulnerable has always been a subject close to the heart of the Holy See. However, Pope Francis went a step further: he not only called for care for the poor and vulnerable being affected by climate change but made the claim of structural social justice that this crisis reveals.

This is what arguably pushed him to innovate in a third way: that is, seeking to go beyond merely contributing a moral perspective on the problem from a narrative level, but passing on to action: seeking to build inclusive platforms for dialogue and collaboration. And here is where his direct engagement with the world at large comes in. In his encyclical Laudato si and his exhortation Laudate Deum he is addressing not only Catholics, but also 'all the people of good will.'

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[21] Examples of Francis's sustained climate advocacy at the UN throughout his papacy proliferate. Notably, one can mention his 2015 address to the UN general assembly in NY; the fact that in 2023 he was invited to speak at the COP28 in Dubai, as well as his participation in bringing about the 'Faith Pavilion', in collaboration with the other leaders which signed up the Abu Dhabi Interfaith statement on climate action for the occasion.

The Pope opened up to collaborate with anyone sharing his concerns, mainly through the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development (DPIHD), which one can see as a second channel of engagement.[22] 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. 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", and it's open to believers and non-believers alike.

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. The documentary gathers actors engaged in the climate crisis from all

[22] 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.).

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. The ones mentioned, however, suffice to showcase his engagement.

4. Analysis: A Roadmap to Address Gaps

This section presents the analysis of the individual case study, while the findings from all three case studies will be synthesized to draw the overall conclusions.

The Pacific Climate Warriors (PCW) 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 youth leadership. Originating from the urgent calls of youth activists, the movement has since expanded to include the broader Pacific Islander community, reflecting a collective, culturally grounded approach to social justice. Observations suggest that inter-Indigenous and intercultural dialogue played a crucial role, as Pacific Islanders—both in the diaspora and across island nations—mobilized as a united community to confront the ongoing and imminent threats of climate change, transforming their shared cultural identity into collective political action.

The urgency of considering whose voices are heard in climate governance is clearly evident. Beyond the traditional classifications of Annex I and non-Annex I states—where responsibilities are increasingly complex and contested, particularly as some non-Annex I states have become major polluters despite historically contributing less—Pacific Island communities illustrate that the most affected populations often differ from those traditionally prioritized in policy frameworks. While natural disasters may strike indiscriminately, climate change disproportionately impacts countries with specific geographical vulnerabilities. In the case of Pacific Islands, these vulnerabilities are tied to physical conditions, such as sinking land and low-lying coastlines, rather than any inherent weakness or lack of agency among Indigenous peoples. Their claims and advocacy are legitimate responses to

environmental threats, grounded in the realities of their geography, rather than reflecting a subordinated social position.

In this context, the involvement of these communities as stakeholders in environmental decision-making is essential. This aligns with the principles of procedural justice within the broader environmental justice framework and contributes to distributive justice by shaping the policies and processes that determine how environmental harms and benefits are allocated across individuals, nations, and generations. Importantly, these communities should not merely be "taught" by decision-making bodies; rather, their perspectives and knowledge should be fully integrated as substantive voices within those bodies.

The case of the Shinnecock Indian Nation underscores the imperative of epistemological diversity in climate governance, in other words, the case specified core agendas that must be incorporated when intercultural dialogue takes place. At first glance, the Nation's engagement appears to advance two distinct agendas situated at opposite ends of the spectrum; however, this study finds them to be deeply interrelated. The first seeks to restore the human–nature relationship through the reintegration of Indigenous ecological knowledge, while the second calls for socially just solutions that protect Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination from interference by dominant governance structures.

This dual focus exposes a fundamental limitation of contemporary global climate governance, which remains heavily dependent on technocratic approaches that privilege centralized decision-making and technical expertise while structurally neglecting local knowledge systems and the lived experiences of non-mainstream communities. Here, "non-mainstream" refers broadly to knowledge and communities excluded from dominant agendas—ranging from scientific research produced outside the English-speaking world to Indigenous epistemologies dismissed as unscientific.

The marginalization of Indigenous ecological knowledge, as exemplified in the Shinnecock case, risks erasing sustainable environmental practices refined over generations, while the failure to uphold Indigenous self-determination perpetuates social inequities that relegate these communities to

the periphery of decision-making. Collectively, these interrelated agendas demonstrate that effective climate action must integrate environmental and social dimensions as coequal priorities, rather than treating one as subordinate to the other.

Though Pope Francis's engagement spans a wide variety of activities and actors, one can find three common main intentions across them: first, to create awareness around what he understands as the source of problem (the morality or lack thereof of the "technocratic paradigm" of culture and the human); second, to seek social justice for the most vulnerable in society; third, 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, Creation and themselves.

By engaging on the climate issue in the global climate negotiations arena, he highlighted the moral and value-laden dimension of it. Specifically: he pointed out that the roots of the problem are cultural and moral, rather than merely economical or technical. He challenged the technocratic paradigm in *Laudato Si'*, which prioritizes human use of technology to dominate nature while disregarding the intrinsic value of God-given creation, both non-human and human. This reductionist mindset obscures the wider consequences of climate change and further marginalizes those who have contributed the least to the crisis yet are disproportionately affected by it.

He stressed that the solution demands radical change from the predominant consumerist lifestyle that drives climate change through a change of fundamental attitude to life (a spiritual "ecoconversion"), as well as joint collaboration from everyone. This recognition of human life as taking part in a broader ecological system of relations directly informs the specific approach Francis took in his leadership for advocating climate action. He called this

approach one of "fraternity and social friendship".[23] This approach consists in placing radically open and permanent dialogue at the center in constructing the necessary bridges of cross-cultural collaboration.

This 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.

We consider that this perspective, translated into ethical leadership through his several collaborations and projects to advance sustainable climate action, yields valuable insights into how intercultural engagement might be most conducive to advancing effective sustainable climate policies, since the radical openness of his approach seems to imply inclusivity by construction. Francis's efforts seem to have given fruit by virtue of his capacity of practicing "epistemological holism", that is, to put into dialogue his own perspective with that of others, not from a place of superiority but from a place of equals, trying to co-create understanding and shared solutions. A paradigmatic example of how far he was willing to go with this attitude is the Disney+ documentary *Amen: The Pope Answers* (2023), where Pope Francis invited a group of ten young people, from all over the world, to ask him or challenge his views on any topic they liked, demonstrating cultural and intergenerational openness.[24] In the context of the climate crisis, one can

[23] Cf. Francis, Fratelli tutti: On Fraternity and social friendship. Encyclical Letter, 2020.

[24] *Amen: The Pope Answers* (also known as *Amén: Francisco responde*) is an 83 min. documentary. Dir. Jordi Évole and Màrius Sánchez, 2023, Disney+. The cohort included a non-binary person, a pro-choice girl, a guy who was abused by a member

see the imprint of this same approach all over, from initiatives such as *The Letter*, to the ideas expressed in the *Laudato si'* encyclical itself, which was a result of intellectual exchange with experts in other fields of knowledge besides catholic theology.

5. Conclusion

The putting together of the case studies revealed the following insights/takeaways on the question of identifying how intercultural dialogue can improve its effectiveness for global climate action:

1. The diversity of climate change-based social needs that demand intercultural dialogue.
2. The different ways intercultural dialogue can be enacted at different scales (transnational, community-based, grassroots) while confronting the shared challenge of climate justice (which goes with social justice).
3. The specific ways in which pleas for climate action are related to pleas for climate justice, and their intricate relationship between them.

From this, there are two needs that emerge in practices of intercultural engagement for effective climate action: (a) the need for bridges of communication among the different scales; (b) the need for ethical leadership at the global scale to connect these bridges. Keeping these in mind, we explored the particularities of Pope Francis's ethical leadership for climate justice to discover in which ways his engagement integrates such insights and addresses those needs.

Francis's contributions towards reimagining an effective model of intercultural engagement through his advocacy for climate justice have a two-fold dimension: a narrative one and practical one. In both cases, Pope Francis's approach to climate action is grounded in moral leadership and

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of the Catholic Church when young, a former nun who stopped being a Catholic as well as a catholic girl.

shaped by his theological understanding of the human–nature relationship. In terms of narrative, through the idea of "integral ecology", he underscored 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. In terms of practical contributions, he gave an example of how faith-based leadership can open new avenues for dialogue and collaboration that go beyond conventional climate governance, through institutions like the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and projects like the Laudato Si' Action Platform, connecting actors at different scales. This approach has yielded the fruits of generating new spaces for inclusive dialogue and collaboration on climate that transcend conventional climate governance.

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