

Traditional Knowledge in Adapting to Climate Change

PACE - SD FACTSHEETS SERIES: NO 11



(Source: PACE SD EU GCCA Project)

What is Traditional Knowledge?

Traditional knowledge (called 'TK' for short) is information and beliefs regarding the relationship of living things to one another and their surroundings. The knowledge is based on a deep understanding of the local environment. To many Pacific islanders, TK is a way of life and means of survival. The knowledge has been passed down from generation to generation through stories, songs, poems, ceremonies and rituals. TK is a unified, holistic knowledge that originates from and is characteristic of a particular society and its culture.

As one circumpolar northern elder said "Traditional knowledge simply put, is local knowledge; it is knowledge that is built up by groups of people through generations of living in close contact with nature".

Traditional knowledge:

- *Still exists and has origins in local communities who know their surrounding environment.*
- *Are ways of knowing and understood by communities (physically and spiritually); which encourages more community participation and stronger communication networks.*
- *Is often supported by community Elders and leaders, which gives it more leverage as the community trusts these people.*

- *Is a deeply profound understanding of their surroundings. It's more holistic and integrated into all living and nonliving things. Some communities who may at times be distrusting of modern technology, rely on true and tested ways of knowing.*



Traditional customs and dances performed in Tuvalu
(Source: Karen McNamara)

Using Traditional Knowledge to Understand the Climate and Climate Change

In relation to climate change, TK may advance scientific understandings, offer new information about changes and impacts, and provide new perspectives on adaptation.

Traditional knowledge has a distinct worldview; different from that of science. A worldview is how one sees and interprets the world, which is often combined with a collection of beliefs about life and the universe held by an individual or a group.

Part of TK and this worldview is traditional language. Language itself has an important role in people's need to express themselves, and TK helps to strengthen and embody distinct worldviews. When Indigenous languages are not used, in favor of more accessible languages, there is a risk that culturally specific knowledge will be eroded in the translation process.

Indigenous observations based on oral histories, verbal and nonverbal communication have helped to define changes in their surroundings. This traditional knowledge has the potential to fill gaps in climate data at the local and regional levels, and inform culturally-appropriate adaptation strategies.

Knowledge of climate, seasons and disaster preparedness comes from the local people observations of their land across generations. Important areas of TK that can be used for climate change adaptation and/or disaster preparedness are:

- Food security – having extra food, and preserving and storing food in safe locations.
- Weather events – being able to predict weather events and their impacts.

- Infrastructure – building houses and settlements that will withstand extreme events (such as flooding and cyclones)
- Crop planting patterns and influence of lunar cycles
- TK of Pacific traditional navigation (use of the stars and wave patterns to navigate)
- Ecosystems – planting native trees to reduce erosion and prevent landslides.

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Local communities throughout the Pacific have long been coping with and reducing their risks to environmental change and natural disasters. To do so, initiatives have included water harvesting systems, management of land and cropping patterns, seasonal climate forecasts, land use strategies and specific house building techniques.

Singas village in Morobe Province (Papua New Guinea) is a small community situated along the banks of the Markham River, which experiences yearly flooding. To help with flood risk reduction, the community uses their knowledge of the environment to know the right places to build in the dry season and utilises traditional bush materials to build their homes on stilts.

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This factsheet is produced by PACE-SD under the funding support of the Australian Government's 'Future Climate Leaders Program' (AusAID-FCLP) and the European Union's 'Global Climate Change Alliance (EU GCCA) Project'.

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