

Hofstra University

Model United Nations Conference 2024



Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee (SOCHUM)

Mariama Kabbah, Co-Chair

Sydra Daniyal, Co-Chair

Dear Delegates,

A warm and enthusiastic welcome to this year's HUMUNC! I am absolutely delighted to be your Co-chair for the Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee (SOCHUM) and I cannot wait to embark on this incredible journey of diplomatic discourse and problem-solving with all of you.

I am Mariama Kabbah, a sophomore majoring in Mechanical Engineering at Hofstra. While my academic pursuits may seem quite different from the world of international relations and MUN, I have found a true passion for bridging the gap between engineering innovation and global challenges. As the Public Relations Chair of Hofstra's MUN club, I have been able to channel my dedication to both fields, fostering connections and creating spaces for meaningful discussions.

Since I arrived on Hofstra's vibrant campus, I have immersed myself in the MUN community, attending conferences like NYU Model United Nations Conference (NYUMUNC) and University of Chicago Model United Nations Conference (CHOMUN). These experiences have been incredibly rewarding, enabling me to learn, grow, and collaborate with like-minded individuals who are equally passionate about creating positive change in the world.

Now, onto the heart of the matter—the topic of our committee: the "Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion." This issue resonates deeply with our responsibilities as global citizens and future leaders. The fast fashion industry's effects on the environment are undeniable, and your discussions and solutions during this conference have the potential to drive real change in the fashion landscape and a positive impact on the global issues it affects.

As you embark on this MUN journey, remember that each voice matters, and every perspective contributes to the richness of our discussions. I am here to support and guide you throughout this conference, and I cannot wait to witness the inspiring solutions and collaborations that will undoubtedly emerge from your collective efforts. Let's work together to delve into the complexities of this topic, analyze its implications, and propose innovative solutions that can pave the way for a more sustainable future.

Once again, welcome to SOCHUM, and I look forward to meeting each one of you and experiencing the dynamic discussions that lie ahead!

Warm regards,

Mariama Kabbah
Co-chair, SOCHUM Committee

Dear Esteemed Delegates,

Welcome to the Hofstra University Model United Nations Conference (HUMUNC) Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee SOCHUM Committee! It is with great pleasure that I extend a warm welcome to each and every one of you as we gather for this year's conference.

My name is Sydra Daniyal. I am a sophomore at Hofstra University. I am an Honors College student double majoring in medical ethics and philosophy. I have been a part of Model United Nations since high school and am so excited to continue my journey here at Hofstra.

As one of the Chairs of SOCHUM, I am thrilled to have the opportunity to guide and facilitate meaningful discussions on critical global issues. As Co-Chair, my role is to ensure a fair and productive environment where every voice is heard, and every delegate can contribute to the shaping of impactful resolutions. I am here to support you in navigating the intricacies of parliamentary procedure and to guide the committee towards consensus and progress.

Once again, welcome to the Model United Nations SOCHUM Committee. Let us embark on this journey with a shared commitment to fostering understanding, cooperation, and meaningful solutions.

Best regards,
Sydra Daniyal
Co-Chair, SOCHUM Committee

Introduction to SOCHUM

Welcome to the Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee, more commonly known as SOCHUM, or The Third Committee of the General Assembly. SOCHUM is a cornerstone of the Model United Nations (MUN) experience, providing a unique space for discussing matters that directly impact the well-being and rights of individuals, communities, and societies across the globe. Participants in SOCHUM will discuss a wide range of topics, such as:

questions relating to the advancement of women, the protection of children, indigenous issues, the treatment of refugees, the promotion of fundamental freedoms through the elimination of racism and racial discrimination, and the right to self-determination. The Committee also addresses important social development questions such as issues related to youth, family, ageing, persons with disabilities, crime prevention, criminal justice, and international drug control.¹

At the heart of SOCHUM lies a fundamental goal: to engage in constructive debates that lead to actionable solutions. While our discussions may occur within the context of a simulated environment, the ideas and proposals we generate have the potential to influence real-world policies and decisions. Our aim is to tackle the complex challenges we face with creativity, diplomacy, and a commitment to positive change.

We are gathered to address the topics of “Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion” and “Cultural Heritage Preservation in the Face of Climate Change” to analyze, brainstorm, and advocate for approaches that balance human activities with their effect on the protect our planet in regards to areas as diverse as economic activity, culture, and human rights.

Introduction to Topic 1: Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion

Welcome, esteemed delegates, to a crucial opportunity to address the environmental impact of fast fashion and explore pathways towards sustainable fashion practices. But what exactly does this mean, and why is it so important?

Imagine a world where fashion trends change in the blink of an eye. This is “fast fashion”—quickly making and selling clothes that are inspired by the latest runway styles, but are available to consumers a fraction of the cost. Fast fashion, however, involves practices that prioritize speed and low costs over environmental sustainability and ethical production.

The fast fashion business model involves rapid design, production, distribution and marketing, allowing brands and retailers to pull large quantities of greater product variety and allow consumers to get more style and product differentiation at a low price...[the] model drives consumers to continuously purchase cheap clothing and discard them quickly due to its poor quality...This cycle of buying and discarding creates a huge environmental problem, with the world accumulating mountains of textile and clothing waste every day, most of which are not biodegradable.²

Over the years, the fast fashion industry has grown like wildfire, but it's come at a heavy cost for both the environment and for people around the world.³ Our goal within this committee is to tackle these issues head-on and find solutions that can help create a more sustainable future for fashion.

Environmental Impact

The fast fashion industry contributes to environmental degradation through excessive resource consumption, water pollution, and increased waste. The production of cheap and disposable clothing often involves harmful chemicals and unsustainable practices, contributing to pollution and climate change. To guide your research, a few key issues we would intend to address in debate are highlighted below:

Resource consumption

Fast fashion relies on large quantities of natural resources such as water, land, and energy. The production of raw materials like cotton and synthetic fibers requires extensive water usage and agricultural land, contributing to water scarcity and deforestation.⁴ For example, it is estimated that more than 200 million trees are turned into clothing fabrics per annum, and even more forest space is cleared as “major fashion companies are accelerating the deforestation of the Amazon to aid production of their leather products.”⁵

Pollution

The textile dyeing and finishing processes in fast fashion often involve the use of toxic chemicals, including synthetic dyes and treatments. At least seventy toxic chemicals are used during the various dyeing procedures that produce fast fashion. These chemicals can contaminate water sources, harm aquatic ecosystems, and pose serious health risks to workers and local communities. In fact, the fashion industry is responsible for twenty percent of industrial water pollution due to its discharge of wastewater containing “a cocktail of carcinogenic chemicals, dyes, salts and heavy metals”.⁶

The European Union has banned over thirty chemicals typically used in fashion production due to serious conditions they may cause, both acute (migraines, asthma, inflammation, breathing issues, and more) and chronic (cancers and potential infertility), but “but its testing program is small and easily skirted.”⁷ Furthermore, synthetic compounds in fast fashion clothes shed 500,000 tons of microfibers into the oceans every year. A report published by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 2017 estimated that thirty-five percent of total microplastic waste was due to synthetic textile microfibers.⁸

Carbon footprint

The transportation of raw materials and finished products across the globe contributes to greenhouse gas emissions. Additionally, the energy-intensive processes involved in manufacturing, transportation, and retail operations contribute to the industry's carbon footprint. This results in fashion releasing about ten percent of total CO₂ emissions, and the industry's share is projected to more than double by 2050 according to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation.⁹

Waste generation

Fast fashion encourages overconsumption and rapid disposal of clothing. Many cheaply made garments have a short lifespan and end up discarded, contributing to the growing problem of textile waste. Synthetic fibers, commonly used in fast fashion, do not biodegrade easily, and can persist in the environment for a long time. Furthermore, research shows that 2.6 million tons of fast fashion clothing returned by consumers in the United States in 2020 ended up in landfills. In addition, the average item of clothing is worn thirty-six percent fewer times before it is disposed of today compared to fifteen years ago.¹⁰

Policy approaches to counter fast fashion

Addressing the environmental impact of fast fashion requires a shift towards sustainable industry practices. This includes adopting eco-friendly materials, reducing waste through better design and manufacturing processes, promoting circular economy models, and raising awareness among consumers about the consequences of fast fashion consumption. The fashion industry has a critical role to play in adopting more responsible practices to mitigate its environmental footprint.

Some examples of eco-friendly materials include pineapple leather and linen. The creation of “leather” from discarded pineapple leaves requires less water than leather made from cattle. The process also does not require toxic chemicals, and waste can be reused as fertilizer. Durable linen fabrics derived from flax plants are significantly more eco-friendly than cotton because their cultivation requires less water and no chemical pesticides or fertilizers. Biotechnology may be another important consideration as researchers recently discovered a protein in squid that could be produced on a large scale and “could be used to create garments which are recyclable, biodegradable and last longer.”¹¹

Overall, it is important to remember that environmentally conscious production practices are a key step, but it must be addressed along with waste associated with fast fashion. Circular economies—those in which “products are used again and again”¹²—must be developed to combat waste. This involves recycling instead of discarding textiles as waste, repairing worn goods, and redesigning manufacturing methods to optimize material use and repair opportunities. Not only does this limit waste, one study found that a “circular economy could unlock \$4.5 trillion of value by 2030.”¹³

Case Studies: Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion

In our quest to understand the real-world implications of the “Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion,” we will delve into two comprehensive case studies that vividly illustrate the challenges faced by both the environment and the people involved in the fashion industry.

Case Study 1: Rana Plaza Tragedy

On April 24, 2013, the collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory in Bangladesh shocked the global community. Structural damage was noticed the day before the collapse, but the five garment factories in the plaza ignored warnings to close, leading to the loss of 1,134 lives and an estimated additional 2,600 workers injured. Over twenty-nine major clothing brands from around the world that catered to the insatiable appetite for fast fashion had orders from these factories, including “Benetton (Italy), Bonmarche (UK), Cato Fashions (USA), The Children's Place (USA), El Corte Ingles (Spain), Joe Fresh (Loblaws, Canada), Kik (Germany), Mango (Spain), Matalan (UK), Primark (UK/Ireland) and Texman (Denmark).”¹⁴ This tragic event highlighted the dire consequences of prioritizing profits over the safety and well-being of the individuals who create our clothes.

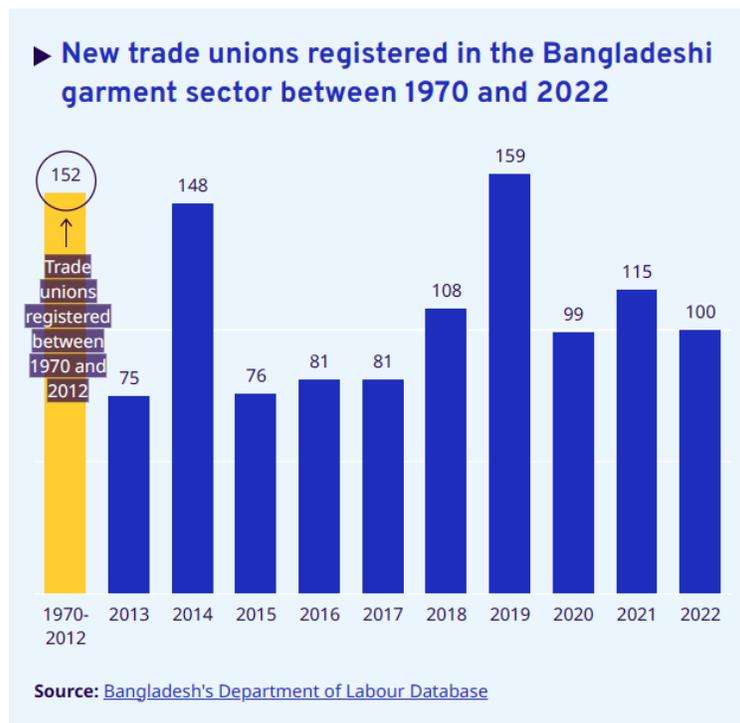
*Figure 1: Rescue efforts after the collapse of the Rana Plaza garment building in 2013.*¹⁵



In the wake of this disaster, some important reforms addressed failures that led to the tragedy with the hope of preventing another one. Garment factory inspections were significantly increased, and the government and private companies cooperated to ensure the safety of 3,780

factories. Many additional reforms were implemented. New labor laws protecting and simplifying union registration have rapidly expanded union numbers and memberships allowing for a more protected workforce (see figure 1). Furthermore, the Bangladeshi government established a Department of Inspections for Factories and Establishments to make “more effective, credible and accountable”¹⁶ inspections.

Figure 2: Trade Unions formed before and after the Rana Plaza disaster¹⁷



A National Occupational Safety and Health Policy was also designed alongside a National Action Plan to overcome remaining deficiencies in workplace safety.¹⁸ Some key developments include forcing the private sector to cover some costs of safety inspections, repairs, and renovations—enabling officials to conduct 56,000 inspections and 140,000 safety improvements. Bangladesh now has “one of the world’s toughest factory safety agreements.”¹⁹

Case Study 2: Cotton Farming in Aral Sea Region

The Aral Sea, once the fourth-largest lake in the world, has nearly vanished due to excessive water diversion for cotton farming—a key component of the fashion industry.²⁰ The environmental fallout has been devastating, affecting ecosystems, livelihoods, and the health of communities in Central Asia. This crisis began when the Soviet Union rapidly increased the level of cotton farming in the region in 1959 to make Central Asia the fourth largest producer of cotton in the world. Poor water and land management resulted from the dash to produce as much cotton as possible.

As the Aral Sea dried up from overuse, weather patterns have become more extreme, and competition over water followed. “Without the moderating influence of a large body of water, the seasons have become more extreme. Already hot summers have become hotter, dryer and longer; and winters, shorter, more [bitter,] and dry.”²¹ Salt plains have also emerged, and “[toxic] salts now rain down hundreds of kilometres from the Aral’s basin, damaging [crops,] and people's health in an increasing circumference.”²²

The forests and wetlands seen in the region up to the 20th century have continued to disappear with the Aral Sea itself. Uzbekistan has continued Soviet-era irrigation policies to maximize cotton production, so the Aral Sea has only become further depleted in recent years. In addition to the salt rains, dust storms blow carcinogenic compounds into areas inhabited by people. In order to provide labor to pick the cotton, the government forces Uzbek people to labor in the fields, even children. Although the Uzbek government claims to have banned child labor, they do not enforce the ban. The Guardian describes the current situation as “a catastrophe that has provided irrefutable evidence of the damage being done to our planet by the fashion

industry.”²³ Without change, the last remains of the Aral Sea will dry up, leaving the once rich and biodiverse region a toxic desert.

Figure 3: The Aral Sea in 2000 (left) and 2014 (right).²⁴



The Guardian points out that Uzbekistan faces little criticism from the U.S. and UK for its human rights record. However, the fashion industry could be an important actor for change if “brands [implement] legally binding contracts with suppliers that ensure suppliers and sub-suppliers do not ever purchase Uzbek cotton. The contracts could be verified using traceability systems and social audits, a process that requires time and money but which is fully achievable.

These case studies paint a vivid picture of the interconnectedness between fashion, the environment, and people. They highlight the urgent need for a shift towards sustainable fashion practices that respect both the planet and those who contribute to the industry.

Bloc Positions

To prepare for the debate, delegates should research whether their country has laws or regulations pertaining to fast fashion or related issues like sustainable manufacturing, circular

economies, and worker rights. The presence of these policies, or the lack of them, may determine your country's proposals and votes in the committee. Developments in fast fashion in some geographic areas can be found below:

European Union

The European Union emphasizes the need for strict regulations on fashion companies operating within member states, as noted by the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles.²⁵ This includes encouraging the use of sustainable materials, reducing waste through circular economy models, and imposing penalties for excessive pollution. The bloc plans to introduce innovative technologies that minimize the environmental footprint of the fashion industry, including research into risks and impacts of microplastics.²⁶ The EU is also committed increasing pan-European awareness about the importance of ethical and sustainable fashion choices, using social media campaigns such as #ReFashionNow, which emphasizes supporting changes outlined in the EU's Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles.²⁷

Asian countries

Countries in Asia may favor a gradual shift towards sustainable fashion practices, with large manufacturing countries like China considering the economic significance of any reform and Japanese companies facing investor pressure to adopt stricter environmental standards.²⁸ Southeast Asian member states are active in a rising secondhand apparel market size, as many companies are expanding into upcycling, thrifting, and other ways of recycling clothing.²⁹

Africa's rising fashion industry

The African Union (AU) addressed the preservation of traditional craftsmanship and supporting local artisans in producing sustainable fashion products through the AU Model Law on the Protection of Cultural Property and Heritage.³⁰ The fashion industry is growing on the African continent, with distinct styles and producers emerging in many countries and major “fashion week” events in 32 of 55 countries on the continent.³¹ Members emphasized the need to reduce waste by promoting local production, upcycling, and recycling—instead of just being a dumping ground for donated clothes that are poor quality.³²

Latin America

Latin American countries are major players in producing raw materials and textiles, but also as leading fashion consumers. Fashion companies are pioneering sustainable production, incorporating traditional craftsmanship, and protecting workers' rights.³³ Consumers in the region have a strong preference for purchasing in stores, which can help reduce pollution and waste from returned or discarded clothing.³⁴

Guiding Questions

1. How can international standards be established to regulate the use of chemicals, water, and other resources in fashion production?
2. What can be done to ensure that manufacturers take on the responsibility of product disposal and recycling?
3. How can countries with a heavy reliance on the fashion industry balance economic growth with environmental sustainability?

Topic 2: Cultural Heritage Preservation in the Face of Climate Change

In an era defined by the relentless challenges posed by climate change, the preservation of humanity's cultural legacy face significant challenges and threats. In the face of environmental disruptions, preserving our shared past, which includes tangible monuments and intangible customs, has become an important priority of United Nations organizations and member states.

On November 16, 1972, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, which defined "cultural heritage" as:

monuments: architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations of features, which are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science;

groups of buildings: groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape, are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science;

sites: works of man or the combined works of nature and man, and areas including archaeological sites which are of outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view.³⁵

The convention separately defined "natural heritage" sites as areas not shaped by humanity, but possessing natural beauty that are appreciated for the unique qualities and equally deserving of protection.³⁶

Although the convention recognized the importance of preserving cultural heritage sites, there are no specific mentions of the dangers of climate change to these sites. It does, however, call on all parties to the convention to preserve cultural sites on their territory "to the utmost of its own resources and, where appropriate, with any international assistance and co-operation, in particular, financial, artistic, scientific and technical, which it may be able to obtain."³⁷

The United Nations has also recognized the importance of preserving cultural practices that define humanity, in particular, indigenous cultural practices. In 2001, the United Nations Commission for Human Rights established a position of Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples to observe and report on issues of significance to indigenous people to the United Nations community. In the most recent resolution re-authorizing the office, the mandate addresses the Special Rapporteur's role in addressing the effect of climate change on indigenous communities:

The resolution renewing the mandate also requested the Special Rapporteur to participate in relevant international dialogues and policy forums on the rights of Indigenous Peoples and related issues, including on the consequences that climate change has for Indigenous Peoples, to undertake thematic research and to develop cooperative dialogue with States, intergovernmental organizations, civil society and other stakeholders on effective and sustainable practices and possible solutions.³⁸

While the United Nations has provided tools for member states to protect cultural sites and practices, the evolving threat of climate change makes it necessary for the committee to further examine the topic. The committee will delve into how climate-related phenomena like coastal erosion, flooding, wildfires, and temperature extremes affect cultural heritage sites and practices. Additionally, it will examine the broader consequences of cultural heritage loss, including the erosion of identity, knowledge, and cultural diversity.³⁹ Below are some of the critical climate change threats to cultural heritage preservation in the face of climate change:

Rising Sea Levels and Coastal Erosion

As the effects of climate change cause rising sea levels, cultural heritage sites located in coastal areas around the world, such as coastal cities, archaeological sites, and cultural landscapes, are vulnerable to erosion and other types of damage. "Twenty percent of World Heritage sites in Africa are vulnerable to rising seas today. And by 2050, that percentage will

more than triple if emissions aren't curtailed."⁴⁰ A similar study in 2018 of the forty-nine World Heritage Sites located in low-lying coastal areas of the Mediterranean Sea found that thirty-seven “are at risk from a 100-year flood and 42 from coastal erosion, already today.”⁴¹

Rising sea levels due to climate change are not the only flooding risk to cultural heritage sites. An analysis of World Heritage Sites vulnerable to river flooding “shows that [twenty-three percent] of sites are exposed to river flooding globally. Thirty-five [percent] of them are natural sites (sites coinciding with water resources are excluded) and [twenty-one percent] are cultural and mixed sites.”⁴² Figure 4 illustrates cultural heritage sites around the world that are endangered by river flooding.

Figure 4: River Flood Risk of UNESCO World Heritage Sites⁴³



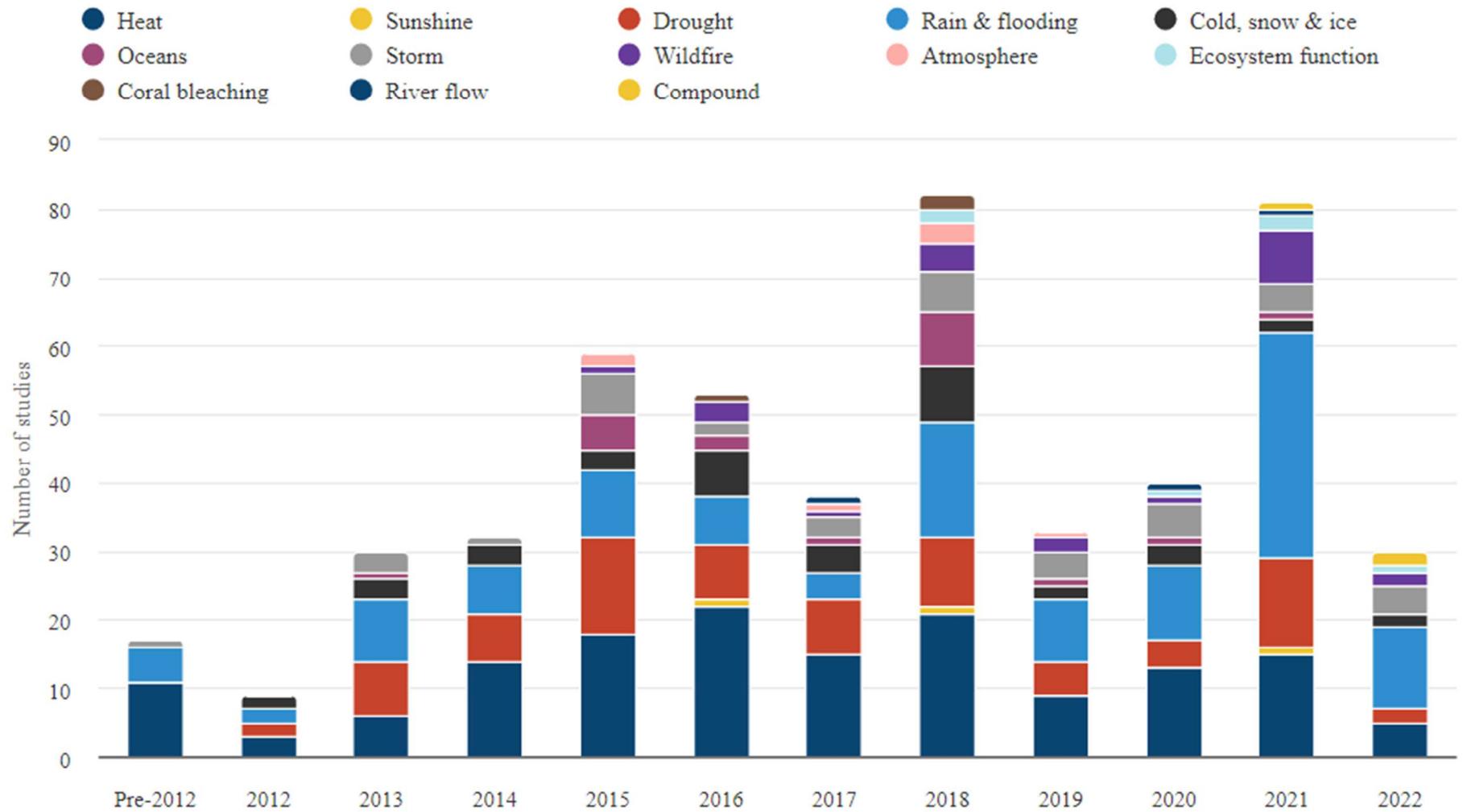
Extreme Weather Events

In 2006, UNESCO prepared a report acknowledging the risks climate change posed to World Heritage Sites, encompassing over 1,200 cultural landmarks and natural environments.⁴⁴ Cultural heritage sites in coastal areas such as the moai statues of Rapa Nui (Easter Island) and Kilwa Kisiwani, a historic city in Tanzania, are threatened by erosion from rising sea levels. Salt water from rising sea levels increases the threat of damage to sites like Bangladesh's Mosque City of Bagerhat. It is projected that by 2100, the Pacific island nations of the Maldives, Tuvalu, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, and Kiribati, may lose their entire cultural heritage if the islands become uninhabitable due to rising seas.⁴⁵

Figure 5, below, details trends in extreme weather since 2012. Delegates can use the data in the chart to understand the types of extreme weather events in that period. Delegates can also use the data to assess the potential threats to cultural heritage sites in their country.

Figure 5: Extreme Weather Events by Category and Year⁴⁶

Extreme weather event attribution studies



Loss of Biodiversity

According to the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity, biological diversity (or biodiversity) is defined as “the variability among living organisms from all sources including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems.”⁴⁷

Cultural heritage is often intertwined with biodiversity, and climate change-induced biodiversity loss can impact cultural traditions, rituals, and practices that depend on local ecosystems. For example, in many indigenous cultures, traditional healing practices are rooted in a deep understanding of local biodiversity. Knowledge about the properties and uses of various plants, often passed down through generations, forms the basis of traditional medicine. The benefits of traditional medicine are also being explored by pharmaceutical companies, but biodiversity loss could threaten these opportunities, as well.⁴⁸

Figure 6 shows how deforestation occurs significantly in South America and Africa. Since nearly sixty percent of the 404 million hectares that indigenous people in Latin American live on is located in the Amazon Basin “...farming, logging, and mining take over these lands, robbing indigenous people of their homes and traditional ways of life.”⁴⁹

*Figure 6: Deforestation and its impact on Indigenous communities*⁵⁰



Cultural Displacement

Climate change forces people to relocate due to extreme weather events or rising sea levels, disrupting cultural communities and traditions. Cultural heritage associated with specific regions may be lost or fragmented as communities move. For example, Latin America will have seventeen million internal climate migrants by 2050.⁵¹

Case studies

To visualize the harrowing effect climate change can have on communities, below are a few highlighted places where the threat of climate change has drastically impacted life. Delegates should work to find solutions for safeguarding heritage sites in their country and in others by incorporating technology, climate science, and community collaboration to safeguard the future of these historic treasures.

Venice, Italy

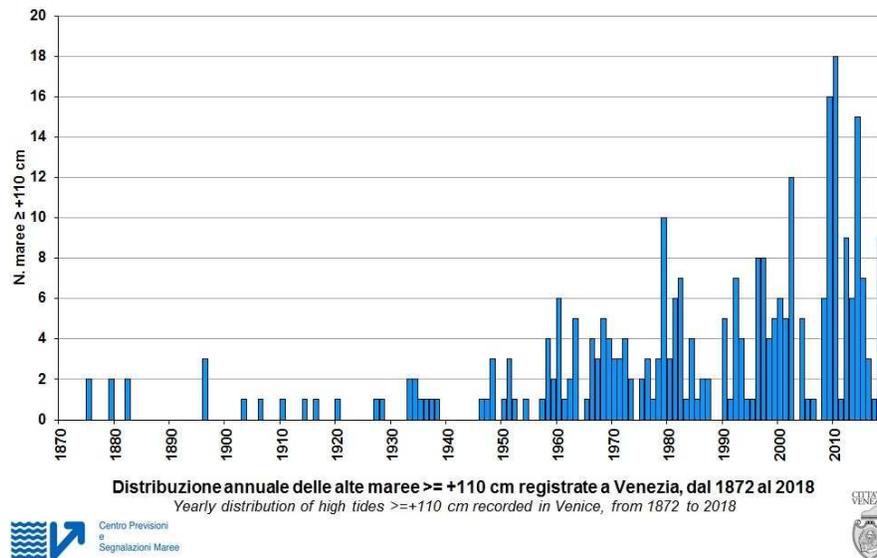
Venice, a historic city built on canals described as “a watery maze of a city, full of tiny footpaths and tucked away squares, hidden museums and secluded, centuries-old churches”⁵² is also famous for “its lagoon, water-filled streets and gondolas.”⁵³ The unique location and design of Venice now puts it at risk due to rising sea levels and increased flooding.

In November 2019, Venice suffered its second-worst flooding event since records began almost 100 years ago. The tide peaked at 187cm (6.1ft) above sea level, resulting in more than 80% of the city being underwater. A state of emergency was declared, and there was an estimated €1bn euros worth of damage, according to the Mayor of Venice, Luigi Brugnaro.⁵⁴

To combat flooding, the Venetian city government “manages a special High Tides Centre, which provides daily forecasts and alerts by email, smartphone app, text messages and alarm sirens. The city also has special pathways raised from the ground that allow people to move around when the tide is high.” To address the flooding, Venice has established a project

titled MOSE, a series of mobile steel gates that are raised and lowered on command, depending on the level of water in the lagoon, and is the primary defense against the city of Venice and the Venetian Lagoon from flooding.⁵⁵

*Figure 7: Frequency of tidal flooding greater than 110 cm in Venice*⁵⁶



The Ancestral Puebloan Sites, Southwestern United States

The Ancestral Puebloan Sites located in Mesa Verde National Park are a unique cultural heritage site because of the sheer volume of history they contain. According to the U.S. National Park Service, “[the] architecture preserved at Mesa Verde reflects more than 700 years of human history.”⁵⁷ Over 600 cliff dwellings have been found carved into the steep walls of canyons crossing the region, and there are approximately 5,000 total archeological sites in total. These sites “tell of a people adept at building, artistic in their crafts, and...with accomplishments in community living and the arts that rank among the finest expressions of human culture in ancient America.”⁵⁸ However, the Mesa Verde park and the rich cultural history it holds is now under threat from climate change.

In Mesa Verde, the first national park established to protect archaeological treasures in the United States, cliff disintegration, wildfire, loss of surface water and the proliferation of invasive species are the biggest climate-related threats to park resources... Fire is the most noticeable sign of climate change in Mesa Verde. Mesa Verde has lost about half of its forest cover since 1906, when it was founded, with fires burning 24,000 acres from just 2000 to 2003.⁵⁹

Not only have fires destroyed the “once lush forests” in the park, but they also have “...scarred some ancient stone walls, and it caps the soil with a hydrophobic layer, preventing water from seeping in. As a result, water rushes over the land as if it were rock, and that can damage artifacts and exacerbate flash flooding.”⁶⁰ Since park staff cannot stop environmental factors causing fires, they cut shrubs and trees that can fuel large fires, especially near famous cliff dwellings. These efforts have been successful, but these adaptations further change the sites from their original appearance.⁶¹

Bloc Positions

While geographic location may provide a starting point for determining your nation’s policies and potential committee blocs, a state’s ratification of and participation in existing agreements on cultural heritage sites will provide more insight into their position. The aforementioned Convention on Biological Diversity has achieved a large membership, with 196 parties ratifying or otherwise fully joining the treaty. The United States, notably, remains a signatory as it has not officially ratified or joined the convention.⁶²

At the same time, the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage has 195 member states that have ratified the agreement as of May 2023. This means the document has almost “universal recognition, as one of the most ratified legal instruments in the world.”⁶³ As all nations present in this committee are also member states of the convention, its guidelines may serve as a basis for initial debate.

With all these similarities, an important distinction between nations is their willingness or ability to support related measures through funding. The end-of-year World Heritage Fund report reveals that only nine nations (including Brazil, Denmark, France, Germany, Norway, Oman, South Africa, South Sudan, and the United States) made voluntary contributions between January 2022 and December 2023. On the other hand, sixty-one member states did not meet their total required contributions to the fund. Some of these nations (including Bangladesh, Iran, Paraguay, Sierra Leone, and Venezuela) made no payments while others made partial payments (including the United Kingdom, Pakistan, and Greece). The full list of contributions by country can be found and downloaded from the UNESCO website.⁶⁴

Guiding Questions

1. What cultural heritage sites are present in your country's territory, or shared with bordering countries? How are they managed? Do they face specific threats from climate change?
2. Which of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites are found in your country?
3. What role can international organizations play in supporting cross-border efforts to protect cultural heritage from climate change?
4. Does your country have an indigenous population with distinct cultural practices? Are these countries protected by domestic laws?
5. How can local communities be empowered to actively participate in preserving and protecting their cultural heritage in the face of climate change?
6. What role can digital documentation and technology play in preserving the history and significance of cultural heritage sites that may be vulnerable to climate change?

Endnotes

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