

# Marginalized Coastal Communities & Development Explained

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**YALE**

**MacMillan Center  
Regional Futures Lab**



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Coastal development and climate adaptation can deepen inequality when the needs of marginalized communities are overlooked. Small-scale fishers, Indigenous groups, and low-income coastal residents often face displacement, exclusion, and growing climate risks despite their deep ties to coastal environments.

## Who are the marginalized coastal communities?

Marginalized coastal communities include small-scale fishers, indigenous and local groups, youth in deindustrialized seaside towns, and residents of informal settlements along shorelines. Despite their deep ties to the coast, these populations face entrenched poverty, limited public services, and what researchers call "spatial stigma"—a branding of their places as failing or "left behind." Structural inequalities linked to class, race, citizenship, or geography leave them disproportionately exposed to pollution, climate hazards, and precarious employment, while giving them little voice in the decisions that shape their futures.

## How development and climate action can displace them

Coastal development—and even well-intentioned climate projects—can deepen these inequalities. When flood defences, waterfront parks, or green infrastructure raise property values, a process scholars term "climate

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gentrification" pushes long-term, low-income residents toward more precarious and less protected areas. Tourism resorts, land reclamation, and large-scale marine industries frequently privatize beaches and degrade fishing grounds, while the emerging "blue economy" discourse often channels investment toward industrial interests rather than small-scale livelihoods. Planning tools such as marine spatial planning rarely center equity, so the costs of growth fall on those least able to bear them. As highlighted in expert consultations, traditional ecological knowledge—accumulated over generations—is systematically sidelined in favor of narrowly defined "scientific" evidence, and formal safeguards that look robust on paper frequently break down in implementation: communities may be consulted during project design yet excluded when benefits are distributed.

## Toward more equitable coastal futures

A growing body of scholarship argues that a just coastal future requires treating social sustainability and equity as core goals, not afterthoughts. In practice, this means meaningful participation by local and Indigenous communities from the earliest design stages, transparent and enforceable benefit-sharing arrangements, and accessible finance for community-led fisheries, tourism, and conservation. It also demands that traditional knowledge systems be recognized as legitimate sources of evidence in planning and governance. Without these shifts, coastal development risks reproducing the very exclusions it claims to address.

## Consulted Experts



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